

Management By Walking Around (MBWA), or Please Don't "Prowl, Growl and Scowl"

**Confidence.
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Presented by Gilda Bonanno

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Management by walking around (MBWA) is a common management practice that can be very helpful in managing and engaging employees, setting a good example, and staying in touch with what's really happening with employees.

It means that the manager leaves his or her office to go out "onto the floor" of the office, plant, lab, etc. and see what people are doing. The purpose is two-fold: both to learn what is going on and get a sense of morale, and also to demonstrate that you're interested and present.

However, MBWA can be misused or done in a way that has the opposite effect of what's intended. Done incorrectly, MBWA can turn into what I call "prowl, growl and scowl," a phrase inspired by a client who was describing the behavior of a senior executive at her previous company. When the executive returned from a trip, he always made a point to use MBWA to catch up with what was happening in the office.

In this case, MBWA consisted of him prowling around the office, sneaking up behind someone and growling, "what are you doing?" There was no smile – just a serious look as he stared down at them. It got so bad that employees would call each other to warn when he was out "on his rounds" so they could pretend to be on a phone call or hide in the conference room or bathrooms.

Here are 8 tips that will help you and your employees benefit from MBWA without it turning into "prowl, growl and scowl."

1. Make it part of a regular routine.

If you only come out of your office when things are bad or you're on a witch hunt, looking for a scapegoat, then people will associate your MBWA with that. Don't wait for a special occasion to walk the halls and check in with employees.

2. Don't use it to discipline or find fault.

Unless you observe a serious safety or ethical violation that needs to be addressed immediately, don't use your MBWA to correct employees publicly. This is not the time to remind employees of the "two plants per cubicle" rule (it's okay to make a mental note to address something later).

3. Mind your non-verbals.

Non-verbals, or body language, include facial expression, voice, gestures, posture, movement and eye contact, and they can undermine your words if you're not aware of them. Smile, speak calmly and in a relaxed manner. Don't put your hands on your hips or lean against the desk to glare down at the employee. And no finger pointing.



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4. Have a calm, confident (not cocky) demeanor.

Not only will it convey that you are in control and there is nothing to worry about, but a calm and confident demeanor also can help employees feel confident enough to speak to you.

5. Prepare open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions such as "what are you working on?" or "how are things going?" require more than a yes/no answer and allow the employees to speak. Listen and show interest in the answer. Realize that some employees are uncomfortable or unused to having a conversation with a senior manager and are trying to relax and be polite, while others will take the opportunity to complain or "kiss up." Be prepared for all of these responses.

At one company I worked with, a senior executive would on rare occasions eat lunch in the cafeteria at a table with his employees instead of in his office or in the executive dining room. Everyone was tongue-tied and he was shy, which made for stiff and uncomfortable conversation.

He would have been more effective had he eaten in the cafeteria on a regular basis or prepared some small-talk questions and comments to get the conversation going.

6. Listen.

Demonstrate your respect for your employees by actively listening to them rather than checking your Blackberry or interrupting. Make eye contact and paraphrase what they've said to make sure you've understood.

7. Respect employees' privacy.

Be careful with the personal questions that you ask, avoiding questions that could be considered intrusive or inappropriate and keeping in mind that you still are the boss, rather than a buddy.

8. Be sincere.

Be sincerely interested in your employees' well being, what they're working on and how they're doing. You can't fake sincerity - they will recognize and resent any perceived insincerity or hypocrisy.

Sometimes the very fact that you're using MBWA will "encourage" people to stay on task - that's fine. However, you want to avoid using the "prowl, growl and scowl" version of MBWA where everyone gets the phone call and looks busy or hides while you're on the prowl and then goes back to surfing the web or gossiping once you go back to your office.

Used appropriately, MBWA can be an effective tool for you to demonstrate support and interest and learn how things are really going.



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203-979-5117

<http://www.gildabonanno.com>

gilda@gildabonanno.com

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