

Management by Walking About (MBWA)

By Amy BC Tan

“People leave bad managers, not companies ...,” is one of the results of a famous Gallup survey conducted at corporations in the US. This does not mean we have “bad” people as managers. It rather means that not every high-performing employee is really suitable for a managerial position. Other surveys have shown that less than 30% of high performers have the ability to do well as supervisor.

Many managers lose their people because they have not been able to develop processes for sensing their environment, for feeling the pulse of their organisation beyond what numbers show. Since they have reached senior rank, they unintentionally surround themselves with various mechanisms that prevent them from getting an accurate picture of what is going on. They may have the facts and figures, but often they do not know too much about the feelings of the people, about the heartbeat of the organisation.

In my opinion, there is a real need for managers to constantly gain feedback from all levels in order to help improving the company as well as their own performance. How can managers learn, how develop if they are not informed of where things are going right, where they are going wrong, particularly if it affects their own managerial behaviour?

Annual culture surveys are not good enough to connect managers and their staff. In fact, they are too formal and deliver only lagging information in a very stringent way. They cannot measure the daily pulse of the organisation. Other, more informal ways are needed to help sensing the environment and to create bonds.

MBWA

When I was with AT&T, we were encouraged to see our Managing Director taking time to meet staff on the production line and at the office. He did it nearly every day after lunch, dropped in unannounced and spent time talking to people, found out what was important to them. Staff members did certainly acknowledge the meaning of our MD taking a personal interest in them. This routine - “Management by Walking About” – is an amazingly simple method of going to your staff, listening and talking to them and finding out what drives or bothers them. Yet, it is a powerful way to get feedback from all levels.

Later, after I became HR Director of an insurance broking company, I applied what I have learnt at AT&T. Especially for an HR Director, it is too late to learn about staff leaving the company – during the exit interview. Therefore, I made regular visits to the different business units which were located at different storeys. I made it a habit to speak to my colleagues nearly every day. We had short chats to find out how they were and what they were doing ... even beyond work. At the beginning, most of them were not comfortable to see their HR Director walking around and interacting with them. Some were suspecting that I was checking on them. However, trust was built over time.

One day after I came back from my vacation, a colleague approached me when I was doing my usual MBWA and said “I have been waiting for you as I do have some issues I would like to seek your advice on ...” I truly learned a lot about my colleagues. From time to time I was able to help them – sometimes even with personal issues. And, I have to admit, I learnt about myself, too.

Never underestimate the power of face-to-face dialogue, even in the era of email and SMS.