

The Power of Taking a Walk

Want to know what's really happening in your organization? Go see for yourself

BY BONNEY BROWN



Diane Blankenburg (left), community programs/development director at the Nevada Humane Society, chats with shelter staff.

There have never been more tools to facilitate communication than we have today. We can quickly and easily reach almost anyone nearly anywhere with a text, email or call. Perhaps it's because technology is so convenient that it has all but replaced face-to-face interactions in some workplaces. We issue a memo or announce a new policy via

email, and feel confident that we have made our intentions clear.

Sometimes, though, the ease of communication tools creates a false sense of confidence that genuine communication has taken place. We put the message out there—it must have been heard! And besides, who has time to talk? There are all these emails to answer!

It's no wonder so many management experts say that leaders are often out-of-touch and isolated from the rest of their organization. How can we know that our message was received and understood and that the new policy is being implemented as planned? How can we really know that the team is embracing our mission and priorities? How can we be sure we are instilling a sense of urgency and creating enthusiasm among our employees?

Management by Walking Around

Management by Walking Around (MBWA) is a practice that gained popularity in the 1980s after it was highlighted in the popular book *In Search of Excellence*. The basic approach is what it sounds like: Managers spend some time daily walking through the building in a random manner, seeing how things are being done and checking in with staff. Tech company Hewlett Packard grew by employing MBWA, and Steve Jobs used it at Apple, too, taking the philosophy beyond his staff to the customers by personally responding to their complaints.

MBWA has never gone completely out of style, and many shelter managers know instinctively that walk-throughs are the best way to know what's really happening. Even so, it can be hard for shelter leaders to find time to implement MBWA, so keeping its benefits in mind can help make it a priority.

Benefits of MBWA

- **Connection:** Visiting staff members at their workstations—to ask questions, share a laugh and perhaps help out a bit when needed—fosters a connection. It gives your staff the opportunity to see you as a real human being,

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not just a distant boss behind a desk, making it more likely they will tell you what's really going on.

- **Motivation:** You will learn what motivates and excites individuals on your staff, which will enable you to inspire them to do their best work.
- **Understanding:** Having experienced their reality, you will be able to more accurately analyze what's really going on and identify effective solutions.
- **Accountability:** Regular contact with staff members increases motivation and follow-through on tasks.
- **Morale:** The fact that you care enough to listen to their concerns and to seek input makes them feel heard and valued.
- **Creativity:** Many innovative ideas are born out of casual conversation. You will also discover hidden talents and skills among your staff that can be cultivated.
- **Timely information:** Management guru W. Edwards Deming said it best: If you wait for people to come to you, you'll only hear about small problems. You must go and find them. The big problems are where people don't realize they have one in the first place.
- **Re-energizing:** Not only will the staff witness your commitment to the mission, but you'll feel reconnected to the staff, the animals and the reasons you got into this work in the first place.

With all these benefits, you might wonder why MBWA is not universally practiced. Reaping the benefits of MBWA requires more than strolling around; you need to make a dedicated effort to ask open questions, listen, observe, understand and then follow up. MBWA is valuable, but it's not always a walk in the park.

Getting the Most Out of MBWA

Whether you have been doing shelter walk-throughs for years or are thinking about giving it a try for the first time, here are a few tips.



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Make it ongoing, but not regular: MBWA should be part of your routine, but not on a predictable schedule. The goal is to see things as they are when you are not expected, so you will want to walk through at different times on varied days of the week to get a complete picture over time.

Schedule time: It can be tough to find time for MBWA, so put it into your schedule (remember, you want to pick varied time slots). Dedicating 30 minutes a day, covering different areas of the shelter each day, is a great strategy.

Go it alone: Don't bring an assistant along. One-on-one discussion with staff on their own turf is an important aspect of

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Bonney Brown is former executive director of the Nevada Humane Society.

MBWA. Two or more managers can be intimidating and inhibit discussion.

Keep conversation informal: Relaxed, casual chat, including nonwork topics (like family and pets) presents the best opportunity for building a bond and getting candid feedback. Keeping discussion informal also humanizes you to employees, rather than making them feel like they're getting a visit from the queen.

Equal time: Over time, be sure to visit every department or area, from the admissions room to the kennels, from dispatch to the adoption floor, and to talk with every staff member. Avoid the perception that you spend more time with some people or in some areas than others.

Seek input: Ask each employee what is working well and what their challenges are. Request their ideas and recommendations. Some people tend to tell the boss what they think she wants to hear. Try to hold your opinion back so you can get their unbiased input.

Listen more than you talk: Active listening, where you repeat what you heard and allow staff to offer feedback, is an excellent approach. It not only helps people feel heard, but it enables you to confirm that you understood.

Don't criticize: You will occasionally encounter staff members who are not performing their jobs appropriately. Remember, you are on a fact-finding mission and aiming to build rapport. Make a note of any problems and address them promptly, but in a different setting.

Acknowledge good work: If you see something being done well—perhaps a staff member handling an animal in an especially skillful manner or resolving a tense situation in a savvy way—be sure to compliment the person. Give credit where it's due by letting everyone know when a staff member's idea created positive results.

Share your passion and goals: Look for opportunities to instill your organization's mission and values with the staff.



Taking brief, periodic strolls around the shelter helps give managers a dog's-eye view of operations.

Knowing what's expected and understanding the priorities enables everyone to do their best work. There's no more effective communication than staff members experiencing firsthand your dedication and commitment to saving lives.

Follow up: Get back to people promptly with answers to questions that you could not address in the moment. (If you're like me, you'll need to jot these down as soon as you get back to the office so they won't fall through the cracks.) Getting back to the staff builds their trust.

Management by Walking Around is a strategy that can help you improve the communication and relationships that are so essential to achieving your lifesaving mission. It's economical, and once you get the hang of it, it can be fun. Best of all, the team spirit that can be cultivated when you show an interest in people and their work, along with a passion for the mission, is powerful and rewarding. ■

Have you had experiences using MBWA, or do you have questions about implementing it? Email us at asm@humanesociety.org, and we'll pass your question along to Bonney Brown. She may address them in a future column!