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## Defining the MBWA Leader



*Every leader needs to look back once in a while to make sure he has followers.*

—Unknown

**T**he first edition of this book was published a few years after Tom Peters and Bob Waterman (1982/2004) noticed that the most successful private sector companies all had CEOs who spent a lot of their time in the field. In their popular book, *In Search of Excellence*, they dubbed this practice “Management by Wandering Around,” or “MBWA.” In interviews with these outstanding CEOs, they learned that this was the way the leaders stayed abreast of operations, enabling them to anticipate problems before they happen. Really, these superstar execs were not “wandering” at all. Neither were they simply “managing.” They were engaged in dynamic leadership of their enterprises—MBWA.

In public schools, the best principals spend a large part of the instructional day in the field (Collins, 2005; S. P. Gray & Streshly, 2010). By “wandering around,” the principal becomes the catalyst that brings the individual members of the school community—teachers, instructional aides, parents, students, and administrators—together in the pursuit of excellent schools.

MBWA is an active, person-to-person process that relies on deeds, involvement, and participation to create better schools. It is the school principal’s practice of giving up time in the office to be close to the teachers and students on the campus, in classrooms, in the halls, and at school events. Being an MBWA principal means wandering with the purpose in mind of building a better school for students and teachers. It means being close to the people and the action. It means coming out of the protective office and engaging in the day-to-day work of the school at the teacher level. It means searching for ways to better serve teachers so they can do their jobs better.

To be clear, MBWA results in the principal being close to the teachers, but it does not imply micromanagement or “snooping.” Instead, it allows for informal communication and actually decreases the bureaucratic line of communication. MBWA allows principals to see teachers and staff and talk with them. These short talks have been identified as a powerful change strategy (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2010).

MBWA principals are out of their chairs and on their feet looking and listening for better ways to do things. They wander with a purpose.

### **PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AND BELIEFS OF MBWA LEADERS**

MBWA leaders know that people are the most important asset of an organization and that being with them, communicating with them, and acting on what they say will boost morale. These leaders learn much more about the heart, soul, and operation of their organization by being in touch with the people—other leaders may miss this, and the organization suffers. General Colin Powell (1995) expressed this very well when he described his leadership style—“Go where your flock is” (p. 208).

In schools, student learning is the goal, and people are the mechanisms for producing and sustaining student achievement. Education is a human relations enterprise. It was no surprise to us that the highly successful principals we encountered in an earlier study were all experts in building relationships (S. P. Gray & Streshly, 2008). The presence of the MBWA principal and the hands-on approach to problems genuinely build trust—a critical aspect of healthy professional relationships.

MBWA leaders also know that when given a chance, people speak from their hearts. The words may not be what the leader wants to hear, but they are what the leader must know to assess what is going on. The words may sting, and that's okay. MBWA leaders never punish people for saying what they believe. Do this once, and likely no one will be honest with you again. Only yes-men and sycophants will remain in the organization. When a leader operates with less than 100 percent feedback, the full perspective and the truth are not knowable. One successful leader told us he rarely finished his morning rounds without having someone come up to tell him

something of importance that he would not have learned had he not been there in person.

The best MBWA principals boldly confront the “brutal facts” of their current reality. One effective way to identify problems is to regularly survey your community and faculty. Principals who use this proven technique stay ahead of the wave. They use the feedback to support improvement goals and plans. The result is a stronger, more effective campus climate. Resources A and B at the end of this book contain sample parent surveys for elementary and secondary schools.

In his study of private sector CEOs, Collins (2001) described certain critical leadership practices that are necessary for creating this kind of climate in an organization. We found these same practices also apply to MBWA leaders in the school setting, typified by the following:

- They lead with questions, not answers. Earlier we mentioned the importance of creating an environment of trust in building relationships. Leading with questions is a signal to your staff that you want and respect their thoughts above your own concerning the truths of the problem.
- They engage in dialogue and debate, not intimidation.
- They establish protocols to ensure constructive conflict takes place in a trusting atmosphere.

MBWA leaders possess an honest awareness of self and how their day-to-day operations affect everyone in the organization. Their behaviors are consistent with their espoused values. They create, help others create, and help clarify new visions. They encourage and empower others to join in the quest to capture visions and transform them into reality. MBWA leaders are aware of the power, worth, and value of people. They actively pursue the school’s mission along with other people because they know that leaders who lock themselves in offices and force their visions on others through power-play memos are seldom successful. Power-play executives scare

no one, and no one pays attention. Worse yet, no one is inspired to follow their lead.

Leaders who embrace MBWA do not just spout platitudes describing the value of people; they actually demonstrate that they value people by being with them physically. The best of the great principals also talk about “rolling up their sleeves” and helping with the stuff of curriculum and program development. Simply being with the members of the organization at all levels speaks louder than words. This physical presence with purpose states dramatically, “I’m here because I believe in you. I know that you are key to our success. I want to know what you think—what’s good about your work life, what’s not so good, and what I can do to make it better.”

### EXAMPLES OF MBWA FROM HISTORY

Throughout the ages, effective leaders have practiced key elements of MBWA. One example from the distant past comes from Alexander the Great. When it was clear that his Macedonians were mutinying against his plans to collaborate with the Persians, Alexander went directly to his men and spoke to them. He did not send a memo or a messenger. As H. G. Wells (1920/1961) describes it, “with some difficulty . . . he brought them to a penitent mood and induced them to take part in a common feast with the Persians” (p. 292).

Donald Phillips (1992) used one of America’s most highly esteemed presidents, Abraham Lincoln, to illustrate this style of leadership. Phillips pointed out that President Lincoln believed part of the definition of leadership is to act on behalf of the wants, the goals, and the aspirations of the follower, and he managed to accomplish this directly. No secondhand report for the Civil War president. Lincoln spent much of his time among the troops. They were number one to him; they were the people who were going to get the job done.

## EXAMPLES OF MBWA FROM INDUSTRIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Industry has used MBWA effectively for decades. Early on in the 1940s, Hewlett-Packard began using company-wide MBWA practices when Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard institutionalized them as part of the start-up of their new enterprise. To the wonderment of many in the electronics business, it was alive and well more than 50 years later as evidenced by Lew Platt, then Chief Executive, when he declared MBWA to be a key factor in the company's success. Today, more than 65 years after the management approach was initiated, the company is on a roll. Some say it's stronger than ever, even in precarious national and world financial times.

Joel Slutzky, CEO of Odetics, a high-tech products manufacturer in Anaheim, California, is another example. His public relations manager claimed he ate lunch in the cafeteria every day. He went from table to table—not because he forced himself to, but because he was just that kind of person; it came naturally. He said he has learned that the best interaction results from leveling the playing field in the company. “Optimal communication takes place in the gym—I’m talking to an assembler, a technician, or an engineer, anyone in my organization. . . . The best dialogue I’ll ever get is in these kinds of environments” (as quoted in McKenna, 1993, p. 13). But close encounters between executives and the people in the organization are infrequent in most companies. It is as if management took its cue not from Tom Peters, but from the late Greta Garbo—“I want to be alone!” Unfortunately, this characterizes too many industry managers. Yet wouldn’t America, let alone Enron or Lehman Brothers, be in much better shape today if the board members had spent more time wandering around? Lack of administrative presence in classrooms also characterizes the management style of many school administrators, as we discuss in subsequent chapters.

Elliot Eisner (2002), one of America's most respected thinkers in pedagogy and one who comes from a nonmanagement leadership background, is in sync with MBWA. Eisner says that in the kind of schools America needs, principals would spend about a third of their time in classrooms, so that they know firsthand what is going on. Is one-third the precise fraction, or is it 40 or 50 percent? We've seen that any percentage between 30 and 80 works. The key is what the administrator does while wandering.

The message is catching on in education. A few years back, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Roy Romer had a surprising, fresh-air message for all 850 of the district's principals—he told them he wanted them to wander around inside their schools (Ritsch, 2001). Romer was on to something good. He knew that people desire a sense of involvement, a sense of importance, a sense that what they do makes a difference. Smart leaders nurture this drive, and principals should know that teachers, possibly more than any other group, possess this drive. What teachers really want is some ability to shape what goes on in the workplace. MBWA embodies this “Count me in; we can do it as a team” spirit. The MBWA school leaders, like their private sector counterparts, regularly walk throughout the facility and in and out of classrooms because they know where education takes place. MBWA school principals are out listening for hints and clues to strengths, weaknesses, problems, and solutions. They know that MBWA is about caring enough about what's going on in the organization to talk to the people who know.

### FOR REFLECTION

Consider school leaders you have known who exemplify the MBWA approach described earlier.

- How did the faculty perceive them?
- Were they successful in achieving their objectives?

## THE RESEARCH BASE

In 1990, the authors of the original *School Management by Wandering Around* were forced to admit that MBWA was not based on years of research or numerous scientific studies; rather, they concluded that it was an idea based on common sense and hundreds of years of experience. Happily, we can now amend this statement. MBWA *is* based on many high-quality research studies as well as ancient wisdom and common experiences throughout the ages. MBWA is not new, nor is it difficult to understand. But more often than not, it has been forgotten or put aside in favor of seemingly more impressive activities that can be completed only behind closed doors. As one client of Peters and Austin (1984) said, “MBWA is a blinding flash of the obvious” (p. 3). It clarifies the techniques that successful school leaders and leaders of all institutions, groups, and organizations have been practicing for a long time.

Research over the past 21 years has confirmed MBWA’s benefits (Downey et al., 2010; Frase, 2001, 2003, 2005; S. P. Gray, 2005). The idea not only sounds great; it also appeals to managers, and it is based on hundreds of years of wisdom. It has been practiced by highly successful business leaders such as McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc, automotive industry leader Lee Iacocca, Costco CEO James Sinegal, General Electric CEO Jack Welch, and by many prominent education leaders across the United States. The elite professionals running these organizations understand the value of being with the frontline workers.

Predictably, some leaders simply jumped on board the MBWA bandwagon for the thrill—for the glamour and attention it gave them. They did it without understanding the inherent meaning of the practice, without having it in their hearts. One of our fellow professors tells a story about an executive who had heard of MBWA at a conference and liked the idea. He went to the office the next day to give a power



order to all of his management team—an order citing the exact time and day of each week they should wander. He obviously missed the point. He did not have MBWA in his soul. For him, it was just good advice others should heed. Having middle managers practice MBWA is a fine idea, but the people in charge must demonstrate it. They must live it, if the followers are going to follow.