



Safety management by walking around (SMBWA): A safety intervention program based on both peer and manager participation

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ABSTRACT

“Management by walking around” (MBWA) is a practice that has aroused much interest in management science and practice. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate adaptation of this practice to safety management. We describe a three-year long case study that collected empirical data in which a modified MBWA was practiced in order to improve safety in a semiconductor fabrication facility. The main modification involved integrating an information system with the MBWA in order to create a practice that would generate safety leadership development and an organizational safety learning mechanism, while promoting employee safety participation. The results of the case study demonstrate that the SMBWA practice facilitated thousands of tours in which safety leadership behaviors were practiced by managers and by employees (employees performed five times as many tours as managers). The information system collected information about safety behaviors and safety conditions that could not otherwise be obtained. Thus, this study presents a new organizational safety practice SMBWA, and demonstrates the ways in which SMBWA may improve safety in organizations.

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1. Introduction

Since Peters and Waterman first introduced management by walking (or wandering) around (MBWA) in their book “In Search of Excellence” (Peters and Waterman, 1982), many organizations have adopted MBWA: Walt Disney World in Atlanta to maintain high quality service (McGough, 1992); American Express to improve its operations (Denton, 1996); St. Marks Breast Center at the New Zealand Health Center to provide quality clinical service (Callan, 2000); and Hewlett Stuart, one of Britain’s largest independent construction equipment leasing companies, has adopted MBWA as the company’s leadership model (Van de Vliet, 1995).

Large chains such as HP and Wal-Mart use MBWA to collect first-hand data and to build relationships of trust in the organization (Clark, 2000) and MBWA is also well documented in management texts (see, for example, Adams, 1997; Harte, 1997; Hickman, 1992; Lewis et al., 2004; Sharp and McDermott, 2001). However, there is still a significant lack of empirical research regarding MBWA in management in general, and no research at all that we could find regarding the use of MBWA for safety management in specific. The intention of this study is to describe a modified MBWA

practice that focuses on safety – Safety Management By Walking Around (SMBWA). We will discuss the theoretical aspects of MBWA that were the foundation for the modified SMBWA practice, and describe a case study in which empirical data was collected while SMBWA was practiced successfully in a semiconductor fabrication facility (FAB), and in which an information system was used to support safety managerial activity.

1.1. What is MBWA?

Luthra (2004) explained that MBWA is an unstructured hands-on approach in which managers directly participate in their subordinates’ work-related activities. In contrast to rigid and remote management approaches, MBWA managers spend a significant amount of time informally visiting work areas and interacting with employees. The practice is unscheduled, casual and friendly. As managers walk around they can chat with employees. The two main purposes of MBWA are given below.

1.1.1. Leadership

MBWA can build quality relationships between managers and employees which in turn facilitate employee motivation and encourage employee involvement. For example, Fombrun et al. (1984) suggest that when managers ‘walk around’ the shop floor or assembly line, there is an implicit invitation to the employees to repay the visit. Kunda (1992) argues that the MBWA initiative

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