Establishing red flag mechanisms

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The concept of management by walking/wandering around is thought to have begun at Hewlitt-Packard in the 1970s.

The idea went mainstream in 1982 with Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's classic book, "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies." The basic idea, as the name implies, is management making spontaneous, random and unstructured checks on people, machines and processes.

While I certainly support the idea of supervisors regularly spending face-to-face time with the people they manage and where the work is completed (not the manager's office), I have some misgivings with the concept of the management style.

First, supervisors are among the busiest people on the planet. Thus, expecting them to "spontaneously" visit the troops when they find time is practically akin to ordering it not to happen.

Second, during the course of the past 40 years or so, I'd like to think we've advanced beyond unstructured wandering. That seems a bit too hit-and-miss.

Today's practice of employee rounding adds structure or standard to spending time with employees at the point of value creation. These include:

• Intentionally scheduling time for rounding to increase the odds that it occurs. This doesn't mean that it must be predictable ("Well, it's 10:28; the boss should be coming around the corner right about … now).

• Connecting with employees on a personal level. Not with a generic "how's it going?" but rather something specific like, "Have you got a photo of that 12-point buck I've been hearing about?"

• Consistently asking questions to understand if there are barriers to the employee serving their customers, if someone should be recognized for going the extra mile and if they have any ideas for improvement.

• Documenting main ideas so they don't get lost; these become topics for future rounding discussions.

If barriers or improvement ideas are identified, it's important that resolution remain with the employees if they are capable. And, most employees are typically more capable than given credit for or they sometimes want to admit. Solving problems provides growth opportunities and frees the supervisors for their most important responsibilities.

Which brings us back to time management. How does a busy supervisor consistently find time to round?

Let's start by reducing two of the biggest non-value-added time suckers for any supervisor: Administrational (i.e., paper) work and crisis clean-up.

Be hypersensitive regarding administrational work required of supervisors. Ensure administrational processes are streamlined so supervisor involvement is minimal. Delegate those duties to clerical assistants or subordinates where possible. Having employees responsible for monitoring their performance is more effective anyway.

By being on top of things, both personnel- and process-related, problems can be identified sooner and the number of crises reduced. In addition to saving time, this eliminates the need to apologize to a customer or explain to management why numbers aren't acceptable, which among any supervisor's least favorite activities.

To spot problems early and make rounding most effective, create a series of mini-feedback systems ("flags") that provide instantaneous feedback on whether things are in control (green flag) or out of control (red flag).

Examples of potential red flag mechanisms might include:

• Is everyone wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment?

• Do employees appear comfortable (physically and emotionally)?

• Are people working on the right jobs?

• Are bottlenecks protected (staffed, work staged in front of them)?

• Are standards being followed (e.g., are tools and electronic files stored in the agreed-to place, are the correct process steps being followed)?

• Are visual metrics up-to-date and are results as expected?

• Are various machine parameters within the proper tolerances?

• Request a quality check; is it completed properly with the anticipated result?

• Do things look, sound, smell and feel the way they should?

If things are in control, a typical rounding discussion can occur. If not, immediate action must first be taken to get things back on track.

Realize that really understanding what's going on with people and processes is the most important priority for any supervisor. Intentional (scheduled) employee rounding is simply a way of putting first things first.

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