Leading Results: The importance of visibility

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Abstract:
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the benefits of being visible in stewardship of an organization and the resources invested.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper looks at the concepts of management by walking around and *Gemba* and how visibility can be used to best advantage in a library.
Findings – The paper finds that, in a tough economy especially, staff need supervisors to be visible and support changes that might have occurred, and patrons need to know that administrators are paying attention to how resources are used. A purposeful and meaningful effort by managers to be more visible and accessible can result in greater understanding of details, a better sense of loyalty, and higher levels of morale and patron satisfaction.
Originality/value – The paper provides useful information on the importance of visibility within the library working environment.
Keywords Libraries, Employees, Customers, Communication, Change management Paper type Viewpoint

Article:

Tough economic times have turned everyone into watchdogs of financial responsibility, whether it is making every penny count or justifying to a funding source what money is needed when (usually now), where and why. An important way to manage and gather support for financial decisions is to remain transparent in the acquiring and spending process but also to be visible, signaling to others good stewardship of the organization and the resources invested.

Visibility is a common theme in defining management success in many management philosophies. Many organizational success stories clearly define management involvement, awareness of operational details, and familiarity with patrons and staff as cornerstones to providing a high level of service to patrons as well as serving as motivational tools for maintaining employee morale and productivity. These are defined by such concepts as "management by wandering/walking around" (MBWA) or the Japanese term of "*Gemba*", which means the real place, and can be described as the place where work happens. *Gemba* can be instrumental in addressing value and quality issues where they occur. Many businesses include management visibility as a part of their strategic planning process and promote its value to their stakeholders. Any level of management can improve supervisory effectiveness by making a conscious effort to connect with staff on a frequent basis.

A library environment is the ideal setting for management visibility concepts such as these to flourish. MBWA, a termed developed by Tom Peters in his book, *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman,1982), is all about the visible interaction between supervisors and front line staff that creates the opportunity for dialogue and hands-on discussion of services, procedures, materials and anything else important to the client or end-user. The concept of *Gemba* adds the perception that the front line or "main floor" is the place that establishes value for the end-user, and that it is appropriate to be visible and make decisions in the moment to increase the worth to patrons. For example, a patron who does not understand why a paper subscription was canceled can be shown immediately how to access the electronic version. Library leaders who embrace these concepts can truly

understand what their patrons experience and how their staff feels about their situations. It also provides an opportunity to evaluate how well monies have been spent or invested with one on one feedback as to usage and accessibility.

As a manager, how one is visible is a personal choice that should match individual management styles or overall personality expectations. This makes the technique become more genuine and accepted by staff who could perceive a management presence as intrusive or micromanaging. Service industries in particular have demonstrated measurable results with various management programs that focus supervisors on incorporating into their personal goals and objectives, the investment of their time and effort toward engaging staff. These measurable results can be improvements on benchmarks such as sales, profit margins and customer satisfaction surveys prove the effectiveness of developing these skills. In a library environment, quality of service, accessibility and availability of information resources and effectiveness of instruction are a few of the elements that can be influenced by increased visibility of administrators or supervisors.

Effective visibility as a supervisor walks a fine line between maintaining appropriate work decorum and becoming too personal. Managers or supervisors who practice visibility that is unexpected or out of character run the risk of producing negative results that can adversely affect employees if it is seen as random or inconsistent. For example, showing interest in an employee's work can be intimidating to the employee so it is important to be sincere while creating an approachable demeanor. It is also important to be relaxed, open and receptive to engaging in conversation regarding the work being performed as well as being prepared to answer questions without being defensive. Good emotional intelligence skills go hand in hand with making yourself visible. This means that as a manager, you must be in control of your own emotions and sensitive to the emotions of your workers in order to be less threatening and more productive.

Likewise, interacting with end-users should be approached in the proper manner. If as a supervisor you are not as familiar with the details of processes and procedures, setting a false expectation for the patron will deter getting the feedback and discussion you want. Let them know what you are doing. Show interest in their needs and be transparent in your attempt to evaluate the service they are receiving or in determining if the materials they are using satisfy their information requirements. Letting patrons know that you care enough to be seen as part of the process will likely increase or enhance your credibility to them.

The benefits of management visibility can go beyond simple improvement; it can enhance and yield better overall morale for employees and better service for your customers or patrons. Staff can view a manager's presence as an indication from their manager that their work is valued and that they are important to the organization. An employee who responds openly and appropriately is making an investment him/herself in allowing information to be shared at a different level. It is an opportunity to be seen and provide feedback for the good of the organization as well as satisfy personal recognition needs.

As a manager, this opens a great window of opportunity to understand how the details of the operation can affect the big picture of strategic direction and long term goal planning. Business literature contains many examples of great ideas born from casual interaction between front line workers and administrators or managers who are making large decisions for the whole organization. The best example might be Sam Walton, who spent a majority of his time as leader of his company talking to the front line folks in his stores and reacting to what they told him. And of course his company is Walmart and its success is still making history.

Visibility is also important and can be productive in identifying problems before they erupt into larger issues. Problems surfaced as part of a walk-thru, department visit, casual conversation or simply "being there" can be addressed proactively before they reach a level of crisis or escalated concern. Patrons who are unhappy can express concerns where they occur so that solutions can be found within the place they occur. Employees who have concerns might also have an opportunity to express themselves in a non-threatening, familiar environment.

Visibility and interaction with staff by managers, supervisors and administrators has proven to be an effective tool in business and corporate environments, and the same principles can add value to a library organization. Libraries that are scrutinizing funding and apportioning expenses especially need leaders who demonstrate an interest in how these funds are ultimately used. In a tough economy especially, staff need supervisors to be visible and support changes that might have occurred, and patrons need to know that administrators are paying attention to how resources are used. A purposeful and meaningful effort by managers to be more visible and accessible can result in greater understanding of details, a better sense of loyalty, and higher levels of morale and patron satisfaction.

Reference

Peters, T. and Waterman, R.H. (1982), *In Search of Excellence*, Harper & Row, New York, NY.