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Motivators of MBWA and Communicational Factors behind Them: A Case Study on a Korean Shipyard

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Abstract: This study was conducted with a team of senior managers at a Korean shipyard in an effort to elicit particular motivators for implementing management by walking around (MBWA). To identify the key motivators and communication issues associated with them, a theoretical framework was produced based on the key tensions of social psychology of communication and upward communication as well as modern organizational theories. For this qualitative research analysis, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the executives; the data were then supplemented by five field observations during MBWAs at the shipyard. Coding frame was used to organize modal salient themes for thematic analysis. The organizational and individual motivators identified were then analyzed in-depth to elicit communicational factors underlying these motivators. While identifying 10 salient motivators as organizing themes, the research concludes that MBWA is a contingent management strategy intended to promote upward communication within organizations.

Keywords: MBWA; upward communication; superior–subordinate communication; organizational communication; social psychology of communication

1. Introduction

The novelist John le Carré offered: “a desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.” The wisdom of “seeing is believing” is a normative view, yet, for many managers, it remains a belief rather than a practice. Time constraints, operational distance and barriers of varying ranks are some of the inhibitors of organizational communication. The lack of internal communication, however, when extended in time, can result in a cataclysmic disintegration of the organization. Management wishes to build inspiring leadership with the employees by teaching, listening, and speaking, but the efforts are easily tested by unforeseen challenges coming from the outside. Then, how can desired leadership be achieved when the real issues are lurking outside of the executive offices?

This study was originally inspired by management by walking around, the brainchild of Tom Peters, who first explored the concept in the 1980s in his book *In Search of Excellence* [1]. As the management guru explains, management by walking around (MBWA) helps enhance the managerial capability to maintain visibility and control of teams and their members, thus opening the door for optimization. Hence, MBWA is not just an impromptu walk. Goffman’s insight has provided another direction for this study: an individual’s entering the scene of others commonly is a purposeful action [2]. Thus, it was anticipated that when a manager makes a regular stroll to a project site, various explicit and implicit motivators would be at play. The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach exploring the salient management practice in light of organizational communication. Lessons learned

through this case study are expected to provide guidance to those who may wish to replicate the practice in their workplace.

2. Literature Review

Management by walking around (hereafter MBWA) has been used widely to promote superior–subordinate communication [3]. Luthra explained that MBWA is an unstructured hands-on approach in which managers directly participate in their subordinates' work-related activities [4]. In contrast to rigid and remote management activities, MBWA managers informally visit work areas and interact with employees, through unscheduled, casual, and friendly chats [5]. It is an impromptu movement to facilitate upward communication or "staying in touch," as Peters and Waterman (1982) articulated [1]. Lavenson also aptly captured its communicative feature by emphasizing managerial behaviors such as "communicating, observing, teaching and listening" [6].

Kim suggests that the field-oriented management bring the innovation in manufacturing industry [7]. Kim et al. find that the knowledge transfer between office workers including managers and front-line workers is important for organizations' performance [8]. In contrast, Tucker and Singer find that MBWA is not always helpful for organizations [9]. They suggest that the effectiveness of MBWA programs depends on how they are approached [9].

Empirical research has so far identified two overarching motives of MBWA: leadership and learning [5]. These two motives have been phrased in varying terms such as improving employer–employee communication [10], issue identification and cultural change [11] and "leadership by walking around" [12]. The focal point of MBWA practice seems to be the relationship between superior and subordinates [13] despite one potential purpose remaining in learning [14]. The emergence of MBWA has prompted managers to pay more attention to employee participation in workplace matters [5], with the focus in part shifting from being vertical-versus-horizontal to peer effects [15], a theme that can be related to word-of-mouth.

2.1. Research Question

An organization is defined as an arrangement of interdependent parts of a whole in which behavior is controlled, but it is also where individual actions combine to lead to accomplishments [16]. Thus, leadership does not concern the task of controlling only but also predicting individual actions by seeking open communication. Therefore, leadership walk-arounds should be understood as part of organizational communication strategy. Hence, this study, in large part, aims to investigate the rationales for engaging in the management stroll in conjunction with communication goals. With the assumption that these motivators will comprise broad organizational factors as well as individual ones based on varying leadership objectives, the first research question was formulated as follows:

- 1 What are the organizational and individual motivators of MBWA?

Based on the understanding that MBWA is to a large extent leadership communication strategy, the second research question was produced in relation to the primary one concerning key motivators of the management walk-around.

- 2 What are the communicational factors underpinning these motivators?

It was believed that the primary findings associated with the key motivators of MBWA and their analysis would provide useful insights for addressing communication issues underpinning these objectives. Therefore, the second research question will be discussed in a separate section ("Cross-Sectional Analysis") after the first research question was tackled through a thematic analysis.

2.2. Research Design

Case study is a research design that entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case [17]. In case studies, the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context [18]. Only the case study method could capture such dynamic, changing conditions [19].

This criterion should justify the method of unobtrusive observation. Participant observation involves a flexible, open-ended, opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation [20]. In addition, it provides a distinctive opportunity to gain an insider's perspective and thus an accurate portrayal of a phenomenon [18].

However, the dynamic nature of case study designs required a number of redesigns of the original research [19]. A pilot interview on the given research question revealed that there would be more insight to be gained from individual semi-structured interviews than simple observation. A focus group was not considered because of practical constraints as well as concerns about potential group dynamics [21,22] and silence on a specific subject [23], which typically arises in the organizational setting. To further explain, the goal of this study was to investigate the key motivators for engaging in the management walk in conjunction with various communication motives and goals. Thus, the diversity trait, as it would be often emphasized in focus group-driven analysis, did not align with our goal and directions, in comparison with how individual interview and field observation methods could benefit our analysis.

Qualitative research is concerned with words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data [17]. This research project does not concern measuring frequency or central tendency out of numerical data, although this approach will be insightful for further research on this topic. The use of more than one method by triangulating individual interviews and simple observations was believed to capture the salient social phenomena and enrich the analysis of the data collected.

2.3. Choosing the Case and Participants

This research project was conducted for six weeks during the period from early June to mid-July 2012, with a management team of a Korean shipbuilding company (hereafter, H Shipyard). H Shipyard is nested in an industrial island, a distance that requires two hours of journey from its head office in Seoul. The shipyard is a manufacturing hub for mega-scale new building projects that are undertaken by 25,000 employees. This picture fitted well with the orientation of this research, as its location and distance make management walk-around a particularly relevant theme for its managers.

Purposive sampling was applied in the beginning based on three criteria: (a) member of the senior management team at H Shipyard; (b) practice MBWA regularly and understand the concept very well; and (c) able to allocate at least one hour for an interview. By a screening selection process [18], key informants were successfully reached with the help of the researcher's private network, and the challenge of getting through gatekeepers was initially tackled.

After the screening, efforts were made to reach prospective interviewees. From that point, convenience sampling was imperative because of the variance in the managers' availability. In all, 14 senior managers out of 54 could be reached through snowball sampling that began with two key actors who had been previously acquainted by the researcher. Finally, two interviewees were withdrawn from the list because of accessibility, producing 12 individual interviews in total as shown in Table 1.

2.4. Procedures

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were administered to the first five interviewees. As time progressed, basic themes began to emerge, and, from that point, slightly more structured questions were framed and administered, aiming to better delineate key topics. The topic guide was completed based on the research question after reviewing relevant literature and undergoing

one pilot interview with a prospective interviewee, who offered a time for an informal discussion of the topic.

Table 1. Description of interview participants.

Position	Gender	Total Years in the Company	Place of Interview	Interview Method	Experience of Working in the Shipyard Versus the Seoul HQ (Years)
CEO and President	Male	31	Seoul	Face-to-face	7
Executive Vice President	Male	28	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	3
Procurement	Male	17	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	11
Safety I	Male	27	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	15
Safety II	Male	25	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	19
Strategic Planning	Male	9	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	None
New Business Development	Female	5	Seoul	Face-to-face	None
Marketing, Europe	Male	18	Seoul	Face-to-face	None
Marketing, Asia	Male	21	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	2
Offshore R&D	Male	25	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	10
HR	Female	27	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	None
Production	Male	26	Shipyard, H City	Face-to-face	19

The first section of the topic guide concerns demographic questions including the manager's position, tenure, and general description of his managerial experience, to be followed by Section B, where organizational contexts were explored with an emphasis on its structure and culture. The concept of MBWA was discussed in depth in Section C based on the manager's experience, covering topics such as motivators and implications. Following a period of rapport-building, the interviewees received a brief outline of the research and the topic guide by e-mail and were informed about the confidentiality associated with the data collection. Under the respondents' written consent, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Korean, which were subsequently transcribed by the researcher.

A person can attend to only a small number of beliefs at a given time [24], and personal accounts of a social phenomenon can be constrained by beliefs the interviewees hold. An on-site visit of the field was expected to further elicit implicit motives beyond those explicitly stated by the managers. Finally, opportunities were obtained through which five participant observations were made on an ad hoc basis over six weeks, each lasting two to six hours. Detailed field notes of the on-site observations were imported to a comprehensive thematic analysis, along with the results of individual interviews.

2.5. Method of Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data; but it often goes further than this to interpret various aspects of the research topic [25]. It involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set [26]. The analysis was conducted on the six steps presented by Braun and Clarke [26]. Under a single global theme inquiring the rationales behind MBWA, two organizing themes of external and internal motivator were identified, which then was spilled out into four and six descriptive themes, respectively. For the purpose of this study, coding frame [27] was devised, guided by theoretical background. More meaningfully, it was expanded by the narratives of the interviewees and field observations.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Organizational and Individual Motivators of MBWA

In this subchapter, we present the findings of the individual interviews and field notes and discuss in accordance with the first research question and relevant theories. The summary of quotes and excerpts used in this chapter is summarized in Table 2. First, the external motivator for enforcing MBWA is explored. It is matched by another modal salient theme associated with internal motivators within the organizational context explored in the first section. The summary of key motivators of the MBWA at H shipyard is shown in Figure 1.

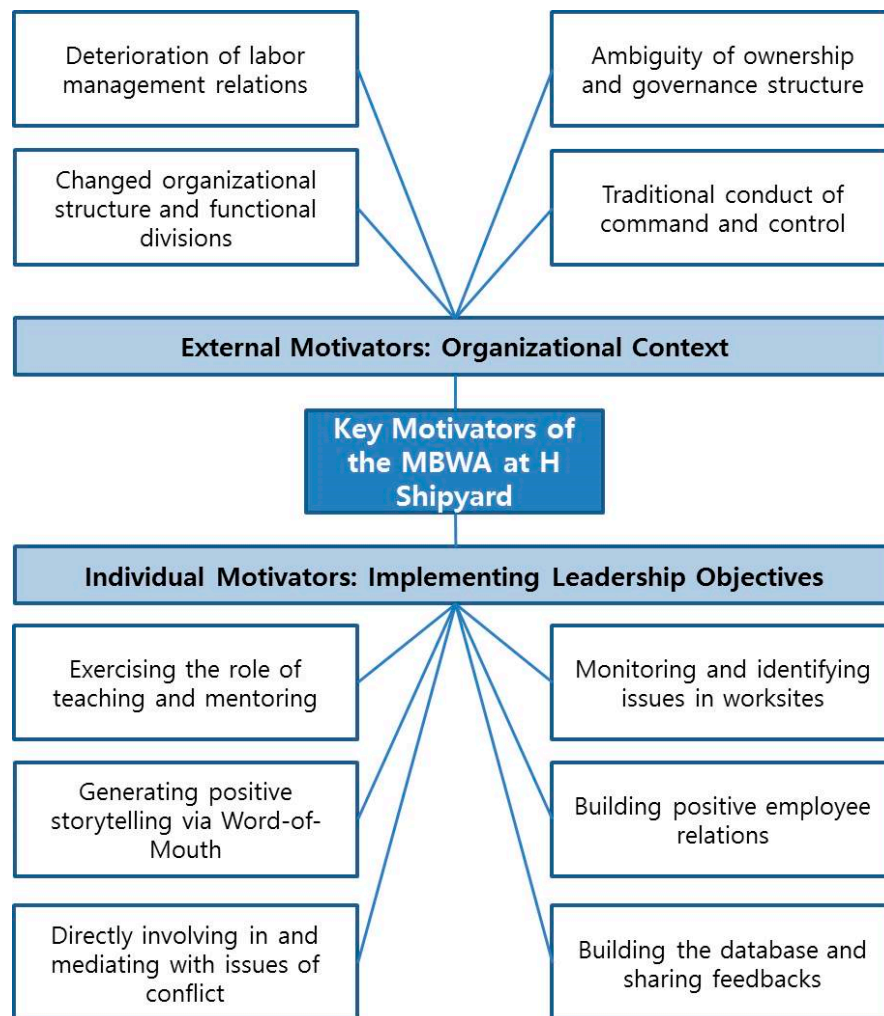


Figure 1. The summary of key motivators of the MBWA at H shipyard.

3.1.1. Organizing Theme I: Organizational Context

An intuitive analysis made out of the individual interviews and field notes indicated that MBWA was indeed a purposeful strategy rather than an improvisational walk, with the principal goal of making intellect adaptation to changing environments [28] as well as making the leadership visible to the employees. For this analysis, it is imperative to make an overview of the organizational context. Field observations were especially valuable in gaining insights into the understated aspects of the corporate heritage in the individual interviews.

Table 2. The summary of quotes and excerpts used in this chapter.

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Quotes and Excerpts
External motivators: Organizational context	Ambiguity of Ownership Structure	In light of the governance structure, I would, first of all, point to the several M & A attempts made about the company over the years. Discussions of merger and acquisition have caused a great turmoil that has given rise to a perception that it is an “organization without an owner”. —Procurement Executive
	Traditional Conduct of Supervision	True, we still have that inertia, a product of an extended boom, which was ended abruptly in 2009 when the credit crunch changed the whole landscape. As a result, we have executives going to places to listen and talk, unlike the ones in the former European shipyards. Naturally, they dropped out of the race. —Marketing, Asia
	Changed Organizational Structure and Functional Divisions	We were absolutely embarrassed by the unprecedented level of disconnectedness witnessed with the new organization. Its parts were all coming off like poorly welded steel plates. Shipbuilding is a collaborative task, an immense undertaking that is enabled by teamwork. —Executive Vice President
	Deterioration of Labor-Management Relations	The scene now looked like a boot camp as the members of the labor union putting up the placards and banners for a planned rally the next day. Spotting the CEO’s profile from a distance, the union leader slipped out of the tent and rushed off to the CEO, offering greetings like, “Mr. President, I know it sure doesn’t look pretty, I’m sorry. But it has been in our plan, you know!” —Field note, day 4 Another reason (for doing MBWA) is the relationship with the labor union. Say, we are different from automakers, most of which are driven by automated production system with conveyor belts. For us, it is all about people, the technicians and engineers all should go together to the docks to build vessels. —CEO
Organizing Theme II: Implementing Leadership Objectives	Monitoring and Identifying Issues in Worksites	Back from an overseas conference, I made it to the scene of fatality after 48 h. A veneer was thrown all over the spot. It was a weird feeling to have, that as if the scene was already under control without me. —Safety I The executive vice president walked to the dynamic positioning simulator and paused to survey the entire shipyard. “How long has the goliath crane been in operation without a lift?” he asked “A” project manager. “Three weeks. The first week went without an operation and an ad hoc replacement was made in the following week. A new lift ordered is on the way and will be re-installed within three days.” —Field note, day 1
	Building Positive Employee Relations	People in all functions come together and sit with me at a company cafeteria, and then, one of the site workers begins to speak like, “Thank you, Executive Vice President, for the hard work you’re putting in the on-going biddings.” Then I reply, “Thank you!” —Executive Vice President

Table 2. Cont.

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Quotes and Excerpts
	Being Directly Involved In and Mediating Issues of Conflict	A site manager's supervision is easily eclipsed by a client's single claim, but not necessarily by a management command. —Marketing, Europe
	Building the Data System and Sharing Feedback	We have a brainstorming with the site teams during the walk-around then the big question is, how we share the data with the people in sales, marketing, R&D, production, procurement, and planning, of 42 functions, possibly more when you add up those subcontractors. —Strategic Planning Heading toward the 2009 crisis, we identified by repeated field visits that there were clearly signs of some empty docks. But no executive was keen to bring it to a board-level discussion, nor did we make any feedback on the issue. —Production
	Exercising the Role of Teaching and Mentoring	No one but I could see the tiny opening on the starboard —it looked like a bad cosmetic surgery, an intuitive observation derived from 10 years' supervision experience. Clearly, there are things we can see and teach off-site, even to those site managers. —Offshore R&D I join their workshop every two or three weeks during my field visit. I share the stories of what it was like when I was an associate and how I made my way to the management. The young people listen to me, and we have a big laugh together. —Procurement
	Generating Positive Storytelling via Word of Mouth (WOM)	(Next day,) the employees cannot, not hear the story (of the dinner with the CEO). It caused a positive response to their husbands and neighbors. Well, the same story goes for an employee who breaches a safety rule. Once an employee without a helmet was spotted, he was stopped immediately and informed to attend five disciplinary education sessions. The rumor spreads so quickly that I could hear the story traveling back to my office. —CEO They [skilled site staff] can't like us, because they work with the pressure of immediate delivery of the project. They can easily blame us next day for being "interventionists." —Safety II

Ambiguity of Ownership Structure

Since its split from the mother company, H Shipyard had to confront a critical issue of "absence of ownership" and of finding a strategic investor for a takeover. Talks about potential deal-making had emerged intermittently without leading to a substantial outcome. The controversy about its ownership structure, coupled with failed bidding attempts, had significantly undermined organizational integration, with one of its implications being huge brain drain of a qualified workforce that remains critical to the shipyard's competitiveness. The field staff bore the brunt with most of them being excluded from the M & A agenda, being stationed far off from the epicenter of the discourse.

In light of the governance structure, I would, first of all, point to the several M & A attempts made about the company over the years. Discussions of merger and acquisition have caused a great turmoil that has given rise to a perception that it is an "organization without an owner".

—Procurement Executive

It was apparent from the management's accounts that the need for upward communication was urgent at that point. Management directives were distributed to the employees only with limited success as they failed to reach the on-site staff, most of whom didn't have access to such data. Targeting these employees, the initial MBWA campaign was intended to dilute and eradicate the rumors through direct superior-subordinate communication. The informative motive of the initial MBWA campaign was demonstrated in a form of speeches and instructions at the management's advocacy. Gradually, it turned into increased rapport-building and mutual dialog with the employees to further dissipate the stressful situation. While the management's initial strategic motivator was widely exercised as knowledge imposition, the MBWA campaign to a large extent served their intended objectives, providing the right information to the site workers and ameliorating their concerns about the shipyard's future.

Traditional Conduct of Supervision

The capacity of "slipping a newly built \$80 million vessel into the water every four working days" [29] is a statement providing evidence of the high efficiency of Korean shipyards. Behind this optimized workflow is a conflict between the traditional mode of supervision and a need for ceaseless innovation. Therefore, there is usually a complicated hierarchy of supervision because of the incurrence of highly comprehensive auditing protocols [30]. Likewise, the collision between optimized efficiency and sporadic protocols at H Shipyard created an eclectic culture where robust two-way dialogue was constantly tried on multiple levels within the traditional decision-making structure.

Admittedly, H Shipyard can be defined as an organization where "an executive badge still overrides a site manager's creative problem-solving." However, this view was contradicted by some respondents, making it difficult to generalize H Shipyard's structural formation. Even a degree of confidence could be captured in their voices that the somewhat outdated model of its command structure is only a transient one, reflective of the company's growing drive for innovation:

True, we still have that inertia, a product of an extended boom, which was ended abruptly in 2009 when the credit crunch changed the whole landscape. As a result, we have executives going to places to listen and talk, unlike the ones in the former European shipyards. Naturally, they dropped out of the race.

—Marketing, Asia

The emerging need for innovation and a brand-new construct of supervision can be explained by the growing demands for high-tech vessels, coupled with contingent factors arising from the financial crisis and market downturn. Increasingly, standardization of work methods, separate planning functions, and the use of slide rules [31] gave way to the view of the organization as an open system [32], urging the management to explore a new avenue of decision-making and thus diversified communication channels.

Changed Organizational Structure and Functional Divisions

According to Jacobides, organizational structure affects its action by providing the foundation for standard operating procedures and routines [33]. The research data also indicated that MBWA was a reaction to a landmark reorganization program enforced in 2010. The shift from the former divisional structure to an entirely functional one was apparently an adventure for the management. The exposure to the new functional divisions left the management "clueless," an embarrassment that resulted despite much expectation about the change.

We were absolutely embarrassed by the unprecedented level of disconnectedness witnessed with the new organization. Its parts were all coming off like poorly welded steel plates. Shipbuilding is a collaborative task, an immense undertaking that is enabled by teamwork.

—Executive Vice President

The management team's embarrassment is understandable: before the reorganization, all the necessary resources used to be provided within each division of the integrated divisional structure as closely as planned. Admittedly, the new functional structure ensured increased operational efficiencies, but this increasingly led to an extremity in labor division and subsequently a lack of cross-functional communication. The diminished communication between the functions had a risk of undermining collaboration between them, with the prospect of eroding the shipyard's competitiveness [34]. Facilitation of direct communication between the groups [35] was expected to help put the fabrics of the organization back together.

Deterioration of Labor-Management Relations

Another prospect that fueled a MBWA campaign at H Shipyard is concerned with a changed labor-management relation. The uncomplicated relationship that the management used to enjoy with its labor union was being challenged by growing concerns about the company's future as cited earlier, fueled by the latest financial crisis. The labor union was explicit about its dissatisfaction with the management's contingency plans on the looming crises and began to claim a quid pro quo following each labor-management negotiation. Although labor strikes continue to take place regularly at the shipyard, which has been the prolonged tradition in the industry, the MBWA campaign gradually led to substantial discussions so as to resolve key issues at H Shipyard.

The scene now looked like a boot camp as the members of the labor union putting up the placards and banners for a planned rally the next day. Spotting the CEO's profile from a distance, the union leader slipped out of the tent and rushed off to the CEO, offering greetings like, "Mr. President, I know it sure doesn't look pretty, I'm sorry. But it has been in our plan, you know!"

—Field note, day 4

Another reason (for doing MBWA) is the relationship with the labor union. Say, we are different from automakers, most of which are driven by automated production system with conveyor belts. For us, it is all about people, the technicians and engineers all should go together to the docks to build vessels.

—CEO

Often, labor-management cooperation and the "adversarial" nature of collective bargaining are seen as mutually exclusive alternatives [36]. This mutual exclusivity of interlocutors caused by differing positions is not a surprising phenomenon in labor-management relations. Luhmann's three improbabilities of communication were nonetheless partly overcome during the bilateral talks, when the management and union members came together, attempted dialogue, and shared timely information as well as their divergent views [37]. The initial improbabilities of communication were alleviated by the management's initiative to visit their counterparts, which may have created a sense of reciprocity.

3.1.2. Organizing Theme II: Implementing Leadership Objectives

The successful venture of a MBWA campaign at H Shipyard is a product of both organizational and individual drives at the management. Subsequently, further motivators for MBWA are explored in this section. Another aspect of the MBWA program at H Shipyard is concerned with leadership and management objectives. Being a manager is different from being a leader [38], and it is predicted that the management walk must go beyond overseeing daily operational issues to provide a leadership model. The individual interviews were especially helpful in capturing these apparent yet latent motivators.

Monitoring and Identifying Issues in Worksites

An organization uses information strategically in three areas: to make sense of change, to create new knowledge, and to make decisions [39]. Managers constantly engage themselves

in information-seeking, as outlined in the respondents' emphasis on issue identification and its management. As Tom Peters articulated, "staying in touch" in conceptualizing MBWA, a similar concern was echoed by the interviewees in varying terms from "fighting issues head-on" to "keeping in touch with the front line." [1] Losing touch with issues on an ongoing project meant having the control overtaken by a site manager, creating an awkward structure of supervision for the duration of the project.

Back from an overseas conference, I made it to the scene of fatality after 48 h. A veneer was thrown all over the spot. It was a weird feeling to have, that as if the scene was already under control without me.

—Safety I

Finding and monitoring issues in worksites for senior managers are likely to take a form of an independent research, especially in an organization like H Shipyard, where a visible top-down hierarchy works as the rule of thumb. Interestingly, the interviewees' narratives and field observations identified that co-construction of knowledge [40] was the preferred manner of communication at this stage of MBWA.

The executive vice president walked to the dynamic positioning simulator and paused to survey the entire shipyard. "How long has the Goliath crane been in operation without a lift?" he asked "A" project manager. "Three weeks. The first week went without an operation and an ad hoc replacement was made in the following week. A new lift ordered is on the way and will be re-installed within three days."

—Field note, day 1

Dialogue was indeed a valuable communication device that bridged the presumed distance between the management and employees. This joint construction of knowledge allowed the participants to mobilize their years of professional expertise on an issue under investigation.

Building Positive Employee Relations

Another rationale for MBWA concerns understanding and diminishing relational contexts [41] with the employees. In contrast to the issue monitoring and identification directed toward informative communication, the management seeks phatic moments with the employees at this stage of the management walk. Once critical issues have been found and examined, the management immediately shares the agenda with various stakeholders, from site managers to even associate-level employees. During this leadership walk, the management looks to discuss and share not only management interests but also "free, aimless, social intercourse," the kind of small talk, gossip, or chit-chat [42].

People in all functions come together and sit with me at a company cafeteria, and then, one of the site workers begins to speak like, "Thank you, Executive Vice President, for the hard work you're putting in the on-going biddings." Then I reply, "Thank you!"

—Executive Vice President

This motive is exercised within the principles such as disregard of ranks, mutual sharing of common concern, and inclusivity, in a very similar manner that the public sphere [43] might be exercised. While the motive of building positive employee relations is less concerned with informative communication, critical issues can still be identified and reported through a chance phatic dialogue. However, this motive during the employee dialogue does not override the phatic dimension: the managers are happy with what would be a less informative outcome as long as a meaningful consensus with the employees was achieved.

Building the Data System and Sharing Feedback

During the interviews, the respondents acknowledged the importance of staying in touch and thus staying ahead in planning, but the issues identified and monitored did not always lead to an

in-depth analysis and appraisal of those issues. Sharma, for example, defined that inability to follow up on the issues identified during a MBWA as a stumbling block to upward communication [44]. At this stage of MBWA, the executives contemplate how to organize and store the data, the task that is defined by dual steps: managing central database based on the field observations and giving feedback to participants of MBWA.

We have a brainstorming with the site teams during the walk-around. Then, the big question is, how we share the data with the people in sales, marketing, R&D, production, procurement, and planning, of 42 functions, possibly more when you add up those subcontractors.

—Strategic Planning

Heading toward the 2009 crisis, we identified by repeated field visits that there were clearly signs of some empty docks. But no executive was keen to bring it to a board-level discussion, nor did we make any feedback on the issue.

—Production

Upward communication is critical to undertaking the information sharing because the database management is potentially a task of joint construction by all functions. Management feedback also encourages superior–subordinate communication across the organizational hierarchy by establishing a reciprocal communication channel. Tourish’s articulation of “upward feedback” is especially relevant, but once back in the offices, the upward feedback was rarely attempted by the management [45]. Reasons for this failure included time constraints and pressure of execution, which is partly explained by the ambiguous nature of MBWA [3].

Directly Involving in and Mediating with Issues of Conflict

The next dimension to be examined has to do with typical management roles summarized as “involving, mediating, and resolving”. The complex nature of shipbuilding and, consequently, the hierarchy of supervision and governance [30] create the scene for communicational improbability, requiring that management exercise vigilance and stay closer to the issues arising in production sites. Delegating the leadership role to site managers, for example, hardly leads to a final resolution of an issue, and often the case is prone to aggravation in the absence of effective leadership.

A site manager’s supervision is easily eclipsed by a client’s single claim, but not necessarily by a management command.

—Marketing, Europe

Despite the ripe improbabilities of communication [37] emerging through the cycle of a vessel construction, people possess a human relationship that makes mediation possible [46]. The presence of management can help employees reach the full potential of interpersonal and intrapersonal relations by empowering their communication capabilities. The respondents articulated that leadership is not a negotiable proposition but is an absolute precondition for making all the fabrics of the organization fit together. Increasingly, the perspective of the shipyard as an open system emerged: problems of relationships, of structure and of interdependence are prioritized in this view, requiring effective mediation for its integration. During this phase, the management aims to reach provoked parties, comfort and engage with them in order to resolve critical issues.

Exercising the Role of Teaching and Mentoring

Blumer claimed that employees interact with their peers to understand their organizational environment, and this goal can be better accomplished when supported by management with elaborate communication strategy [47]. Teaching and mentoring offered by management is both a phatic and informative event that contributes to improved superior–subordinate communication during a

management walk. At this stage of MBWA, not only informal dialogue but also highly planned events such as workshops and seminars help produce similar outcomes:

No one but I could see the tiny opening on the starboard—it looked like a bad cosmetic surgery, an intuitive observation derived from 10 years' supervision experience. Clearly, there are things we can see and teach off-site, even to those site managers.

—Offshore R&D

Often, this didactic communication takes the form of a rhetoric and knowledge, a safety-related seminar attended by the top management team.

This form of public speech is definitely strategic communication, where the discourse is clearly regulated, or even dominated, by a top-down hierarchy. As the event progresses, however, the management speech gradually resembles a pep talk, which is then received by the employees as a mutual, phatic dialog:

I join their workshop every two or three weeks during my field visit. I share the stories of what it was like when I was an associate and how I made my way to the management. The young people listen to me, and we have a big laugh together.

—Procurement

In investigating safety walk-around in high-risk industries, Clarke and Ward suggested that higher employee participation can make training programs in worksites more successful [48]. This insight may suggest that organizational learning still need to embrace phatic elements to produce desired results. As suggested in the response above, a phatic mentoring of this kind can be a vehicle for employee learning and development.

Generating Positive Storytelling via WOM

WOM is a rarely discussed motivator in MBWA research, so it should be a meaningful discovery of this case study. In contrast to upward communication, WOM is more concerned with the horizontal effect of the communication. The management expected that MBWA would produce a sort of “storytelling” [49] by encouraging a common discourse among the employees in its wake, helping maximize leadership effect and support its further motivators

(Next day,) the employees cannot, not hear the story (of the dinner with the CEO). It caused a positive response to their husbands and neighbors. Well, the same story goes for an employee who breaches a safety rule. Once an employee without a helmet was spotted, he was stopped immediately and informed to attend five disciplinary education sessions. The rumor spreads so quickly that I could hear the story traveling back to my office.

—CEO

However, WOM can trigger both positive and negative storytelling [50]. The respondents voiced this concern too, that too much visibility of the leadership may even be counterproductive by causing indifference of the employees or even complaining behavior or rumor [50]. The management was aware of the potential pitfalls of MBWA caused by negative WOM:

They (skilled site staff) can't like us, because they work with the pressure of immediate delivery of the project. They can easily blame us next day for being “interventionists.”

—Safety II

As marketing studies relate, WOM is a communication tool far more effective than advertising or publications. For a large organization like H Shipyard, internal communications such as the intranet and newsletters serve the organization's strategic goals. Most of these publications deliberately run executive speeches and columns, designed to propagate leadership goals. Another side of this spectrum

is that the practice of depositing knowledge hampers dialogic enrichment between communicators [40], the consequence that would potentially undermine upward communication. In this context, WOM is expected to be a valuable management strategy as it promotes collective storytelling among employees, which in turn encourages more horizontal communication.

3.2. Cross-Sectional Analysis: Communicational Factors Underlying in MBWA

In this subchapter, we combine the organizational and individual motivators of the two organizing themes together to provide a cross-sectional analysis, in an effort to highlight salient communicational factors underpinning these themes. To this aim, the theoretical framework is revisited. Secondary findings are presented briefly in the later part of this chapter based on the primary analysis.

3.2.1. Upward Communication

Taken together, the findings of this research indicate that MBWA is indeed a leadership communication strategy that draws on various communication motives, particularly within the three salient tensions of improbable-unavoidable, phatic-informative, and strategic-mutual communication. First of all, we can conclude that the MBWA campaign at H Shipyard has been an effort to break the hierarchical boundaries in superior–subordinate communication. It is worth reiterating Bisel et al.'s [41] concept of relational contexts that continued to emerge in superior–subordinate relations. The systematic hierarchy inherent between superior and subordinates make free flow of communication between them virtually improbable. As shown in the example of the labor–management relations in this research, however, dissatisfaction in their dialogue could impair the company's production schedule and thus challenge its long-term viability.

Based on the research findings, we can conclude that the MBWA campaign at H Shipyard was devised as an upward communication strategy to break the disruptive relational mold. In discussing upward communication and its efficacy, the primacy has so far been placed on “upward flow of information” as Sharma [44] advocated. The research findings share this perspective, but they come with emphasis on its under-researched aspect of relationship-building. Thus, it can be stated that improved upward communication (a) helps superior and subordinates break their relational boundaries while (b) supporting their efforts to promote valuable information-sharing in an open and horizontal manner. These dual objectives should inform that both phatic and informative communications are emphasized in balance in establishing a successful upward communication.

3.2.2. Various Communicational Tensions

Various motivators of upward communication surfaced during the MBWA campaign at H Shipyard, which can be further explained by the key tensions of social psychology of communication as stated in the preceding chapters. First, upward communication by the management was intended to challenge the communicational improbability and unavoidability with the organizational members. Second, it is true to an extent that the unusual relationship of superior–subordinates provides predominantly strategic motivators in their communication efforts—however, the research data also support that the leadership communication strategy could be accomplished only when these motivators were combined with mutual communication efforts, as shown in the example of the management's teaching and mentoring during the walk-arounds. Third, the phatic component during MBWA was almost invariably crucial to ensuring the sustainability of upward communication while providing justification to the participants.

WOM should be considered also as an outgrowth of successful phatic and mutual communication. In this case study, the findings suggested that WOM had the potential of overshadowing the classical corporate communication strategy that had been predominated by top-down, strategic command. Instead of top-down propagation of management policies, WOM could create a common discourse among employees and open up more participatory dialogue. Based on this analysis, it is concluded

that goals of organizational communication can be best achieved by having “a good balance” of various tensions [51] such as those of phatic-informative and mutual-strategic communication.

3.2.3. MBWA as Crisis Management Strategy

As secondary research findings, it is concluded that the MBWA campaign at H Shipyard was conceived and established as part of a crisis management strategy. The data elicited that MBWA at H Shipyard was designed to tackle environmental obscurity stemming from the shipyard’s ambiguous ownership structure, a series of crises such as the 2009 credit crunch, and souring labor–management relations, among others. The traditional top-down supervision and governance became outdated in the face of the contingencies that were uncontrollable to the management.

Systems thinking was helpful in understanding the management’s increasingly tactful response to these changes. A helicopter view is often criticized as a failed management strategy: from an executive suite, it is almost impossible to view the whole picture of the organization. Ascending information flow is disrupted when top-down communication rules, undermining the management’s view and the free flow of internal communication. The worst-case scenario is organizational disintegration.

The extended market boom when the only question concerned was maximized production capacity was followed by the looming crises, which could have been avoided to an extent when MBWA was implemented in the initial stage. Furthermore, the dynamically evolving nature of shipbuilding, in addition to the increasing industrial complexities, forced the management to take a holistic management view by adopting contingent management actions—we can conclude that the MBWA campaign was one of them.

4. Conclusions

Based on the emergent business concept of management by walking around, this case study intended to answer two modal research questions: (a) What are the organizational and individual motivators of MBWA? (b) What are the communicational factors underlying in these motivators? Using the lens of a management team at a large organization of a Korean shipyard, this research highlights the following findings in terms of the first research question.

At the organizational level, the management turned to MBWA to fight with (a) ambiguity of ownership structure; (b) traditional conduct of supervision; (c) ramifications of an expedited reorganization, and (d) deterioration of the labor–management relations. At the individual level, the management leveraged the MBWA campaign to achieve leadership objectives such as (a) monitoring and identifying issues in worksites; (b) building positive employee relations; (c) building the data system and sharing feedback; (d) directly involving in and mediating with issues of conflict; (e) teaching and mentoring, and (f) generating positive storytelling via word-of-mouth.

In responding to the second research question, therefore, we can conclude that:

- a the MBWA campaign at H Shipyard was designed to reduce and tackle contingent factors that increased environmental obscurity;
- b upward communication was used as the instrument for the MBWA campaign, aiming to reduce the “relational gap” and ensure “ascending flow of information”; and
- c upward communication can be facilitated by exploring various tensions of communication such as phatic-informative and mutual-strategic one to challenge the improbable-unavoidable tension in superior–subordinate communication; therefore, having a good sense of balance in exploring these fundamental tensions is helpful in implementing a successful MBWA strategy.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Management by walking around is an emergent concept in the business world rather than an established theoretical work. As a result, examining the issues of social psychology of communication within the context of a volatile organizational environment still remains a work

in progress. The research design has undergone several changes especially because of issues of accessibility, challenging the initial motivation for incorporating ethnomethodology in full scale. It is expected that this limitation is overcome as informed executives gradually turn to this valuable management/communication concept and offer more research opportunities.

The culture and setting cannot be underestimated. While the case study approach allows an in-depth analysis of a single organization and social trend, the limitations of a skewed balance in gender, nationality, and locations tend to diminish its generalizability. It is especially pronounced in terms of national culture values [52], which could not be tackled in this study. Parallels from multiple cases will be conducive to improved generalizability.

Furthermore, it is believed that the qualitative nature of this study will be fully exploited when substantiated by a quantitative methodology. The initial design was to incorporate the results of an employee survey to examine reflexivity [53]. While this idea was dismissed in order to better delineate the research question, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods is expected to enrich the research findings. For the same purpose, increasing the breadth of interview participants from a top-down perspective is expected to be the interesting topic as well.

A dedicated analysis on contextualizing each item of the MBWA motivators would make the research outcome more valuable although it would be hard to rank each item objectively to underscore the different weights.

Additionally, the ethnomethodology can be further expanded to include in-context interviews captured at the moment of observation, in order to achieve a full narrative of the under-researched dimensions of MBWA.

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