

**Roy Williams as recalled by Margaret Morrow —
Or: Roy Williams, a man with great presence and leadership (title as it appeared in
The Oak Ridger)**

The series on Roy Williams has created a great response from retirees of Y-12 and a fair number of present employees. One of the more pleasant surprises was to find that several people still recall him and without exception, all recall the same character traits and repeat much the same thing about his leadership style.

You might say Roy invented “Managing by Walking Around” at Y-12 well before it was popularized by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman who published *In Search of Excellence* in 1982. One writer noted that the strength of MBWA lies in informal communications and getting management out of the office. Another said the name should more correctly be Leadership and Management by Walking Around and took issue with a variation on the name that made it “Management by Wandering Around.” I think you can see why.

I recall when I first read about the term in the Peters and Waterman book, I immediately said, “that is Roy Williams’ natural leadership style.” *In Search of Excellence* was one of the books routinely stressed during the mid to late 1980’s along with Joseph M. Juran’s *Quality Management* and W. Edwards Deming’s *Out of the Crisis*, the pivotal publication of his 14 Points for Management where he points out the value of Statistical Process Control.

In each of these trendsetting books, MBWA was noted as a key leadership/management strategy, although Deming would never have used such a cliché type term. The key concept of getting management out on the working floor and knowledgeable, first hand, of what was going on brought about significant changes at Y-12. Among those was a concept we called “Pride Circles” patterned after the Japanese model of teams working together to solve problems.

Other teamwork and problem solving approaches have been implemented over the years. The latest being the six sigma method and our current emphasis on productivity improvement through team problem solving led by trained facilitators we call Black Belts or Yellow Belts.

While the process has evolved and the terminology is more refined, Roy Williams would be proud of the adaptation of his hands on approach to solving tough problems by getting the people who best understood the problem working on the solution. He would have been a “Champion,” for sure.

The leadership aspect of a manager’s job may well be best fulfilled through MBWA while the management aspect might be better noted in the reports analyzed or the data interpreted. In Roy’s case, that balance was obvious. He was meticulous in his walking around and determined to cover all areas of his responsibility.

As has been noted, he always worked on Christmas Day and was always out in the work area much of his day. Yet, he spent time poring over spreadsheets and data generated to convey the working floor activities.

Margaret Morrow, a manager who worked in the production areas when Roy Williams was there has this to say about him, “I first remember Roy as the division manager for the old Metal Preparation Division. My first interaction with him was in the mid 1970’s, when I developed the purification process. He created quite a stir within the Development management when the call came down that he was on his way to see me. I’ll always remember that once I showed him the process, he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, he said, ‘any help you need that you aren’t getting, call me.’ Needless to say I was the lucky recipient of lots of assistance.”

Margaret went on to say, “He was best known for being the original example of ‘management by walking around.’ Roy was well known to show up at strange times anywhere within the manufacturing organizations, especially the midnight shift.”

Later in her career, Margaret observed of Roy, "When I was fortunate enough to manage the Lithium Organization, the big legend was how Roy discovered the stairwell band. He found one of the guitars but never the real owner. He took the guitar to his office but it was never claimed. During my time there, the real owner of that guitar told me the story was true."

Margaret also patterned some of her leadership style after that of Roy, "When the Lithium focused factory was started, I adapted Roy's ability to hit the "off-shifts" by locating my office in the middle of the production areas so that I had to walk into the work areas numerous times during the day. At that time, work hours were such that I was able to see every shift that day."

Finally, she said, "To sum it up, Roy was a wonderful example of a manager who was dedicated to his organizations. I never heard him lose his temper and he maintained the respect of the folks who worked under his leadership. A quiet man with great presence and leadership."

The MBWA term may have come and gone, having been replaced by numerous other attempts at conveying the same thing. However, the concept used by Roy and Margaret, still produces results today.

A leader will benefit by being around the workers often, alone without a formal group, asking many pertinent questions, watching and listening, trying hard to understand the actual work they are doing and what hampers productivity, always delivering good news, catching them doing something right and remarking about it specifically, and finally never being critical while walking the work areas. Those things work regardless of the label attached to them.

The above are timeless concepts that Roy Williams practiced naturally. As you can see, he is remembered as the Y-12 manager who most effectively epitomized "leadership by walking around."