

Leadership: Managing by Wandering Around (as practiced by Starbucks' Howard Schultz)

Most managers intend to get out of their office and go spend some time with the people who are doing the real work in the distribution center, or clients, or whatever the heck it is. And yet, what typically happens in the course of a day is a human resources problem comes up or a plant breaks down or a computer system goes down, and so you spend the day in critical meetings—and they are critical meetings, and that's what the hell you get your paycheck for—but, at the end of the day, you still haven't been out of your office. You've spent your time with people you've known for 20 years sitting around a small circle talking about this, that, and the other.

One person who has incredibly disciplined himself on the other side, and I think it's one of the reasons his institution has done as well as it has, is Howard Schultz, the Starbucks founder. Big company, lots of statistics, lots of executives, lots of bureaucracy, no matter how hard he may try to eliminate it. But Schultz insists to himself—and apparently pulls it off almost all the time—that he will personally, physically visit a minimum of 25 Starbucks shops per week. And that is just stunning.

And then I asked him—I was at some little event where he was, the only time I ever met him—and I asked him about it, and he said, “Look, I don't care whether we've got three, 13, or 13 thousand shops. The reality of the business is one Starbucks employee selling one cup of coffee to one customer. And unless—despite all the statistics that pour across my desk—unless I can feel it and taste it and smell it and touch it, that is, a fundamental human interaction, I ain't in touch with what's going on in the world.”

And God bless you, Howard, I hope you can keep doing it.