Principles Walk-Around

Idea In Short

When an organization has clear values but daily habits do not reflect them, make the gap discussable. Principles Walk-Around invites participants to reflect on a set of principles, move toward those that resonate with a prompt, and talk with a partner about why. The group compares examples of what it says matters with what people actually experience. Use the practice during transitions or when a team needs to ground a difficult choice in its commitments. Prepare visible principles and open-ended questions, and make it safe to express a difference between aspiration and reality. Close by identifying one behavior the group can change.

Organizations often publish a set of values and then leave employees to interpret what those values mean in everyday work. A principle such as inclusion may appear in a strategy document while meetings still reward only the fastest speakers. Principles Walk-Around helps a group compare what it says matters with what people actually experience. Participants review the principles, move toward one that speaks to them in response to a prompt, and discuss their choice with a partner. The practice reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group.” It offers a way to examine values through concrete examples rather than treating them as slogans.

Put the principles in the room

The host displays the principles in a visible form, such as separate sheets around the room or numbered digital spaces. Participants take a few minutes to read and reflect before the first prompt. The facilitator then asks a question and invites each person to move toward the principle that best connects with their answer. Participants discuss their choice with a partner and leave a brief note about why it fits. The process repeats with new questions, giving people a chance to respond to different aspects of their work.

Prompts might ask which principle is most visible in the team’s current work, which one is

hardest to practice during a transition, or which one should guide an upcoming decision. The prompts should invite reflection rather than test whether participants remember the wording. A short personal explanation helps connect an abstract principle to an interaction, decision, or habit. The facilitator can close the movement rounds by asking which themes appeared and where participants experienced a gap.

Compare aspirations with habits

The core inquiry is the distance between espoused principles and routine behavior. A group may say that it values experimentation yet penalize every failed test. It may claim to respect local knowledge while making changes without consulting people close to the work. Naming the gap can help a team understand why its values do not feel credible to participants.

The conversation should focus on observable patterns. Ask what happens when a principle is easy to practice and what makes it difficult. If the group says that “respect” is absent, ask which meeting behavior or decision process creates that experience. This kind of detail points toward changes the team can make. It also reduces the risk of turning a reflection into an accusation against a named colleague.

The movement is not a vote and does not show which principle is objectively most important. It shows how people in the room relate to a prompt at a particular moment. A person may choose a principle because it is missing, because it is present, or because it matters to their role. Pair conversation gives participants a chance to explain their choice rather than leaving others to infer its meaning.

Make space for honest reflection

The host should establish a tone of curiosity and clarify how comments will be used. If leaders are present, they can model openness by listening without defending the organization’s record. Participants need to trust that naming a gap will not be used against them. The facilitator should invite people to speak from their own experience and avoid turning a difference of perspective into a character judgment.

The standard practice takes about 25 minutes and recommends at least ten participants. It uses individual reflection, several movement-and-pair rounds, and a whole-group discussion. Online, the host can set up numbered breakouts for each principle and invite

participants to choose a room. A chat-based alternative can provide a less visible response when public movement would create pressure. The design should preserve a meaningful opportunity to participate for everyone in the group.

Principles Walk-Around is especially useful during transitions, when people need to make decisions amid uncertainty, or when a team wants to examine how its stated commitments shape its work. It can also help groups decide which principle should guide a specific portfolio or project. Research on organizational values and culture notes that values gain credibility through observed leadership and consistent practices. 1, 2, 3

Choose one behavior to change

The group should end by selecting a concrete behavior to reinforce or change. If participants say that a principle of inclusion is weak, they might test a new meeting practice that gathers input before discussion. If they see a disconnect between transparency and decision making, they might document which decisions are open and which are fixed. The action should have an owner and a point for review. A principle becomes more credible when people can see its effect in routine work.

The host can revisit the same question later and ask whether the experience has changed. The group should not expect one session to close every gap. The purpose is to create a shared picture and a manageable next step. A recurring reflection can help participants notice whether the organization is making progress or repeating the same pattern.

Principles Walk-Around gives values a practical role in group learning. Participants choose a principle, explain what it means to them, and compare the choice with everyday habits. When the host protects honest reflection and connects insight to action, the practice can help a group turn abstract commitments into observable ways of working.

- 1The leader’s guide to corporate culture
- 2Trust in government
- 3Employee engagement and performance

Summary

Principles Walk-Around turns values from wall statements into a subject for reflection. Participants connect a principle to their own experience and compare what the group professes with what its habits produce. The walk makes choices visible, while pair discussion provides space for personal examples. Facilitators should keep the inquiry focused on patterns and avoid using the principles as a test of individual virtue. A useful outcome is one concrete behavior the group wants to reinforce or change, plus a way to revisit it. Values become operational when they guide decisions people can observe. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.