The “Quality Revolution” of the past 30 to 40 years has demonstrated clearly that ignoring the direct input of people actually doing the work often is dangerous and can lead to failure. W. Edwards Deming, often seen as the father of contemporary quality management, noted that: “We must learn to enlist people’s ‘Heads and Hearts’ as integral parts of the work process, not just their ‘Hands’ as extensions of technology and technique.” Today’s best managers and agency owners are leaders focused on bringing out the best thinking and commitment of all employees in order to develop and sustain the most effective work processes and the highest quality products and services. Understanding how to engage and empower employees at all levels often can be the difference between average performance and high performance.

Employee engagement is the opposite of the more traditional way of organizational decision making and taking action that simply had total decision making power in the hands of a few. Everyone else was expected to implement decisions made only by supervisors, managers and specialist/experts.

Contemporary evidence is overwhelming that the best managed and most successful professional insurance agencies proactively engage their employees in ways that reflect a conscious commitment to the notion that all employees can make a significant contribution when properly engaged and empowered. Understanding how to engage employees at all levels often can be the difference between average performance and high performance.

The challenge facing strong agency owners is that they sometimes let their personal control needs and feelings bubble up to the surface. This makes it difficult for them to trust others genuinely to manage key work processes properly. This can impact performance in negative ways. This often results in employees that don’t care or think about how they could better contribute to the effectiveness of key processes and the quality of products or services.

Role of effective leaders

Excellent and effective managers make sure that people do things right and as excellent leaders they make sure that everyone does the right things. The first responsibility of effective managers actually can be to manage themselves thoughtfully rather than...
emotionally in order to lead others in ways that get the best results. To be effective, leaders need to:

• Provide leadership, vision, direction, strategy, goals and set work parameters.
• Ensure that people have the knowledge, skills, resources, information and support they need.
• Promote continuous learning and improvement.
• Help people develop and maintain effective work relationships and communication.
• Be the best student, coach and role model.
• Ensure that everyone makes decisions based on proper facts and data.
• Empower people to control their responsibilities.

Managing yourself is about managing personal feeling, personal attitudes, personality preferences and personal behaviors to bring out the best in yourself and others versus the worst. This is not to say that a manager assumes a false and manipulative personality or behaviors—a quarterback on a given football play may have negative feelings about another player, but he still must throw that person the ball at times to win the game. On days when agency owners or managers have personal problems outside of work, they do not allow related feelings get in the way of how they can best lead their employees.

To manage yourself and lead others, you need to be:

• Competent in your job.
• Committed to the organization and its people.
• Trustworthy, reliable and honest.
• Fair.
• Respectful to everyone, every time.
• Aware of and avoid under managing and over managing.
• In control of your behavior and not let personal feelings dominate actions.
• Confident that others will be responsible and intelligent.

Managers that truly are effective recognize that individuals and work teams need to be experts in their jobs and that people are an organization’s best resource only when they are engaged effectively.

Guidelines for self-management

Managers who lead engaged employees to develop, achieve and maintain high performance through their own self-management do not need to become psychologists or undergo psychological analysis, but they need to:

• Understand themselves and others.
• Learn personality preferences or styles by utilizing instruments such as Attribute Index, DISC Index or Values Index type assessments.
• Manage their behavior “against” their personal preferences, especially when they want to jump in to solve problems immediately when an empowered and engaged work team is capable of handling the situation.
• Recognize that effective leadership requires behaviors that they may find uncomfortable.
• Remember that leadership is about getting others to do the right things in the right ways.

Employee engagement

Employees can provide suggestions to help improve your agency. To keep your employees active and committed to your agency, develop and implement an employee engagement plan, which will outline how you can:

• Model and teach preferred behaviors.
• Provide employees with all the information needed to succeed.
• Take one step at a time and gradually empower individuals and build strong teams.
• Support people even when they make errors and help them learn from their mistakes.
• Be prepared for resistance from employees, supervisors and others.
• Ask people to give necessary new behaviors a chance.
• Track performance resulting from engagement.
• Celebrate milestone wins.

Remember: “Today’s best managers are leaders focused on bringing out the best thinking (heads) and commitment (hearts) of all employees in the development and maintenance the most effective work processes and the highest quality products and services.” They accomplish this by consciously managing themselves and leading others.

The bottom line for managing yourself and leading others is about: the efforts to influence others; attitudes and behavior; generating commitment; building relationships; and using power thoughtfully. 

Babb is a Maryland-based regional director for Paradigm Associates LLC. Paradigm Associates LLC is headquartered in Cranford, N.J., and has locations throughout the U.S. Paradigm provides both agencies and carriers with strategic, executive and sales development processes. Visit www.ParadigmAssociates.US, or call (908) 276-4547 for more information.