

How Changing Your Management Style Can Make You The “Go To” Organization For The Best People

By Kimberly Paterson, President & CEO, of CIM

Ask most insurance professionals who the best boss they ever had was and odds are a few names will quickly come to mind. As they describe these people and what made them effective, a series of common traits almost always emerge. “They challenged me to be my best. They gave me plenty of leeway and allowed me to make my own decisions. But, they provided honest feedback on a regular basis. You always had the feeling that they wanted you to succeed and were there to support you.”

Nine out of ten times, the boss people perceive as their most effective are coaches, not managers. If coaching is so effective with employees, why isn't it the prevailing management style in so many agencies?

Why Coaching Is Not More Prevalent

Ask many agency principals this question, and they'll admit they see the value in coaching; they just don't have the time. Type A personalities will proudly confess that they simply don't have the patience for all that “touchy-feely stuff.”

Time is clearly the biggest obstacle. Agency managers are under tremendous time pressures. They struggle to give their clients attention, develop new business, manage the finances, deal with technology and maintain market relationships. Agency principals spend a lot of time on the run. Employee feedback is often given on the fly or squeezed in between client phone calls. Because of the time pressure, many agents are more inclined to tell employees what they want them to do rather than coaching.

By their very nature, agency owners are self-starters. They know what needs to be done, and they just do it. They expect others around them to do as they do and just get it done. With the day-to-day pressure agents are under, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that not all people work the same way and share the same value system.

Another obstacle is many agents simply don't get a lot of training on how to effectively supervise and manage people. The focus is on the technical, sales, financial and customer service side of the business. They've learned by doing or from the limited number of bosses they've likely had. They hold deeply entrenched beliefs about what works. "Command and control management" and "management by neglect" are often the norm. While they may be expedient choices in the short term, the long-term cost to the agency is high.

The Case For Coaching In Agencies

The battle for top talent is fierce. When it comes to attracting great people, the law of attraction applies. High performance work environments attract high-performing individuals. Coaching is a core skill for agents who want to build and sustain this kind of environment.

Agencies can't afford average performance. Margins are too thin, the marketplace is too competitive and customers are too demanding. Being competent and meeting basic customer needs isn't enough. Today's insurance buyers want a better experience. They get it from companies like Disney and Ritz Carlton, and they want it from their local insurance agent. When they don't receive it, they have an increasing number of options from which to choose.

Agents need the best people – not just producers; but in every position in the agency that impacts the business. Effective coaching helps each employee perform at a higher level.

In a small business every employee counts; and the smaller the agency, the more each one counts. Every agency owner knows that a good "utility player" in an agency is worth their weight in gold. Coaching helps employees see the bigger picture and contribute at a level that goes beyond their basic day-to-day responsibilities. The more employees are given the opportunity to contribute at an organizational level, the better they get at it.

Command and control management isn't effective. Like it or not, people no longer respect institutions or authority; they resist all attempts to be "managed" by a higher authority. In agencies where principals manage by command and control, employees wait to be told what to do. As a result, they deteriorate into a state of learned helplessness. Little moves forward until the boss steps in and provides the solutions. This slows business down, leaves customers hanging and puts tremendous pressure on the agency principal. Coaching gives people the skills and confidence to solve their own problems, which in turn frees managers for higher-value work.

Most agency principals work at breakneck speed. The firefighting mentality that is so prevalent in the business often diminishes the quality of interaction and communication between people. Yet it is that personal connection – in life and work – that people in a contemporary society are so hungry for. Coaching provides the human connection we are all looking for. Coaching requires people to slow down, listen more deeply, learn, and be less reactive.

Coaching will be one of the most important skills a manager can have as a new generation of employees begins to dominate the workplace. According to the Conference Board, by the year 2010, approximately 64 million workers will retire. These retirees will be replaced with Generation Xers (people born between 1965 -1977) and Generation Yers (people born between 1978 -1990). Their needs and demands will be unlike those of previous generations.

According to author Bruce Tulgan, an expert on the impact of generational differences in the workplace, the Gen Xers and Yers expect to be challenged, respected and listened to and well compensated their first day on the job. They don't believe in starting at the bottom. Their mindset is acquiring knowledge and skills so they have options in life. The minute a job stops being a learning opportunity, they look to move on. While these new workers are autonomous, they don't want to be put in a job and left there. They require constant, positive feedback and recognition for the work they do. Coaching provides the framework and tools for helping agents leverage the tremendous talent of this new pool of workers.

Leading A High-Performance Work Environment

Attracting and keeping the best people requires a new style of leadership – whether you have a staff of five or 200. Principals in high performance agencies have learned that their role has shifted from giving directions to giving direction. In a high-performance work environment, the principal's role is four-fold:

Visionary – Walt Disney once said, “If you can dream it, you can do it.” A high-performance work environment begins with a clear, compelling vision of what you want your agency to be. It provides the people you lead with clear direction about where you want to go and provides the guidance system for the business. Effective leaders “light the fire in the belly” everyday by connecting themselves and their people to this vision.

Role Model – Your single most important responsibility is modeling the attitudes and behaviors you value. By virtue of your position, you possess incredible influence. You define the agency's culture by your words, actions and deeds. Your behavior sets the tone, pace, expectations and standards for conduct in your organization.

Coach – Agents can vastly increase their leverage by becoming coaches. Coaching is more than being a cheerleader and handing out “atta boys.” Coaching is a communication process that connects people to performance. When you coach, rather than tell, you help your employees clarify objectives and discover more effective approaches for achieving those objectives. This increases the employee's buy-in, personal accountability and performance.

Facilitator – You provide the support to make it as easy as possible for your people to get their work done. You remove barriers and facilitate positive change by drawing people and ideas out and helping them connect to positive solutions. You facilitate a process that enables people to solve their own problems and act on the organization's behalf.

Many feel they're at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting the best people – they can't compete with the impressive packages and opportunities a large company can offer. But this is simply not true. Research consistently shows that the three factors that

are most important to employees are: “appreciation,” “feeling ‘in’ on things,” and “an understanding attitude.” “Good wages” ranks fifth. Today’s workers want to be: close to what’s going on, part of an organization where they matter and recognized for the work they do. Agents are in an ideal position to offer this kind of environment.