

Why We Need to Manage Our Human Resources

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Ten tools for proper HR management.



I've had the privilege to witness, behind the scenes, the operation of more than 2,000 funeral homes – to see them just as employees see them. I've seen businesses that employ more than a dozen funeral directors and those with just two or three licensed staff. Within this broad spectrum, there are some amazing similarities. Unfortunately, when it comes to human resources management, most of it is inefficient. The striking effect of this behavior is that funeral home owners are not respecting the largest expense in their operation. I have found that more time is spent maintaining the \$50,000 hearse than the \$300,000 staff! Regrettably, little in mortuary school or in required continuing education speaks to HR. I believe there are 10 tools to proper HR management.

★ 1. Hire Properly

Too often, whether the need is for a licensed or non-licensed person, owners hire the first person they meet who is available to work. One owner confided that the firm hired one of its funeral directors because he was the only person to show up not wearing brown shoes with a blue suit.

Please understand that you are hiring *people*, and people have different skills and abilities. Learn how to hire by breaking down the job into its components. How intelligent should the person be for the task? Do you have an impartial way to measure that? College does not necessarily measure intelligence; rather, it measures the ability to take tests. I have seen some people get straight As in college yet have just average intelligence. The factor you do not see is how long a person was willing to study to get the grade. Is the person a skilled communicator? Communication is a two-way street. People are good communicators if they can express themselves as well as comprehend what another is telling them. Do not hire in a panic. In most cases, you know if someone is failing. Do not wait for that ineffective employee to quit. Start looking before the need arises. This gives you a choice. You didn't look for a prom date the week before prom, did you?

★ 2. Train Frequently

Hold staff meetings at regular intervals (see #6). If you have a large staff, that could mean weekly. Training does not have to be strictly in a group setting, as there are individual trainable moments that present themselves. For example, review collecting receivables with the staff member who is not doing a good job in that area. Do it quarterly. Do it when some A/R becomes bad debt. Use video tools and have employees do a mock arrangement. Play it back for them to show them their body language and let them hear their speech. They can only get better when they see how they look to families. If an employee is unwilling to get better, then he or she is not a professional.

The most common form of training I perform is dealing with phone shoppers. Train your staff on these and other difficult matters that they may be performing. Maybe the result is that not everyone does every task. Maybe only a few members of your staff deal with price shoppers. Would you let every licensed embalmer attempt a difficult body reconstruction? No, you'd only let those qualified with the demonstrated skills acquired by specialized training. The same logic should be employed in every aspect of your business.

★ 3. Review Often

Unfortunately, a review is confrontational, and most funeral directors hate confrontation. Most funeral home managers are funeral directors, so they shy away from initiating these meetings. But they are necessary. You owe it to your staff to review their performance for their self-improvement and to ensure the quality of consistently applied service delivered to the families you serve.

If there are three funeral directors on your staff, I guarantee that each has a different way of arranging funerals. Some are more empathetic and some stress easily. Review their results, financially and based on family satisfaction surveys. With your existing management software, I bet you can get an analysis of each arrangement made by a funeral director. You can see average revenue/call, average wholesale/call and even average term

of payment. If you are using electronic surveys, you can sort them by funeral director. These are all matters you should be reviewing yourself and with your staff.

★ 4. Analyze Strengths, Weaknesses and Roles

No one is perfect. We can look at how staff performs in so many ways. Review their average numbers in arrangements. Look at the financial results of their casketed and non-casketed arrangements. Point out those areas that are weak. Train to their weakness. Those areas that are strong, compliment. This is why a review needs to be in writing. If someone has weaknesses, we want to document it. It is akin to a report card. If you give them a "C" and six months later a "B" for the same task, they can see the improvement and so can you. It is just as important to note that they are staying at a "C" or even registering a lower grade.

★ 5. Document the Basics

You probably cannot turn an arrangement meeting into a reality television show by bringing in cameras, but you can videotape your staff by arranging a funeral with each other on slow days. Review these matters as a group. Let someone see how he or she looks to a family. Document their mannerisms. It will help them get better.

★ 6. Have Regular Staff Meetings

Hold staff meetings at regular intervals. If you are in service to a family, the family can come in for arrangements after your staff meeting. If you already had an appointment and a family wanted to come in at the same time, as you were booked, you would tell them so. The importance of the management of your staff is of as high importance as service to a family.

Most managers do not know what should take place during a staff meeting. Start by creating an agenda. Have something to train on for each meeting. Use articles you have read or material from seminars you've attended. Let the staff conduct some training based on material they learned at a convention or other meeting. Have vendors come in to talk about products and how to employ them in your practice. Go over business results. Go over family survey results. Trust me, when you break it down, you can easily find one hour of material to review each staff meeting.

★ 7. Hire Progressively

There is no simple way to disguise this tool. We tend to be a male-dominated business. With more than a third of all people in mortuary schools being female, get ready to hire women. That's right – the best man for the job might be a woman. Do not tell me they cannot go on house removals. I'm sure you have older male funeral directors who cannot or will not and you still find a way to get house removals performed. While I am being blunt, if you are a white funeral home, get ready to hire a minority because minorities are not the minority of mortuary school students. Do not think you need to hire people of one religion either. If that were the case, there would be no Jewish funeral homes in America any longer. You can train staff to have the knowledge of the customs and rituals of all people. If the staff is not willing to learn these differences, then they are not the right fit for your firm.

★ 8. Train Yourself

When you attend a seminar that is eight hours long, you're go-



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ing to have enough material to give eight one-hour training sessions. You can do this in a staff meeting or have a special day of training off-site. The training does not have to focus on major items. It can be on the differences between you and your competitors. When someone wants to know why you are different, it is not about price or caring. Everyone charges. Everyone cares. Do not bring up the "we are a family business" agreement. This doesn't mean anything if the public sees you as being the same. Train your staff on the differences.

★ 9. Give Proper Raises

A raise has four components:

- *Are you giving a raise to this employee?* You do not have to give a raise to everyone. You can choose whom to give a raise. If you are giving a raise, that raise is going to be for one, two or all of the following three possible reasons:
 - *Cost of living* If the COL is 2 percent, then give a 2 percent raise. This gives someone the same buying power in their current year of employment as they had in their previous year.
 - *Merit* If someone is working effectively, this is a raise of more than just cost of living. If you give a raise that is based on merit, then note it as such. This way, someone knows they are getting more than just a cost of living adjustment.
 - *Change of responsibility* Suppose you are asking someone to be responsible for a new duty, as well as continuing to perform his or her existing job. That could be an additional raise. Note it as such.

Again, be sure to note each of these components.

★ 10. Fire When Necessary and Do It Properly

Do not get angry when you have to fire someone. This is usually a failure on two people's part. Remind the now former employee of his or her continued responsibility post-employment, including confidentiality and protection of your corporate records. Put these expectations in writing.

Let the former employee know whether his or her termination was subject to "at will," which means that he or she can collect unemployment, or "for cause," which means that you are probably going to contest his or her unemployment application. It could be that at the time of termination, it is "at will," but then you discover contrary evidence once the employee leaves the building. In this case, you reserve the right to change the term of their termination.

Let the former employee know the process by which you will give references. In most cases, just confirm the date of employment, position and ending compensation. If a former employee wants you to speak on more points, have him or her sign a waiver. That way, you do not invite trouble if he or she does not get a new job due to your communication. In the event the former employee was terminated for cause and you think the cause is a matter of public record, have your attorney respond to any requests for references.

Employee relationships are a matter of contract law. Know how to handle this most precious of your business assets. ★

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