

BY JEFF HARBESON

The Right Fit

PLACING PERSONNEL WHERE THEY WILL FLOURISH AND TRAINING THEM FOR SUCCESS.

THE FUNERAL PROFESSION IS FACING A CRISIS, AND IT'S NOT CREMATION, IT'S NOT FOREIGN CASKETS, IT'S NOT EVEN ONLINE FUNERAL PROVIDERS, IT'S PEOPLE!

Right now, there are more funeral directors leaving the business, either by retirement or simply quitting, than are entering. In my lifetime, I have been bombed, shot at and cut, so if readers get their starched boxers in a twist, so be it – I ain't scared. The truth is that we (in the profession) are our own biggest enemy. That's right – the king is butt-naked.

In this country, each state has individual requirements to enter this profession. The regulations range from zero licensing to dual licensure with a four-year bachelor of science degree. I've been around this business for more than a decade and continue to be fascinated at how we are so efficient at something that does not need to be done in the first place. More emphasis is placed on CYA efforts to create barriers of entry than forward thinking or planning for the future.

Question: Who (people/profession) makes the rules, policies and regulations for each state? The legislation of stringent regulations regarding who may serve a family as a funeral director/arranger is beginning to have consequences.

Another question: What is the correlation between embalming qualifications, arranger qualifications and funeral director qualifications? I'm certain that some magazines have just hit the deck, and Ernestine's phone lines at FDHQ are lighting up like Baghdad on the first night of Shock and Awe with complaints that I just asked a logical question.

What if we took a deep breath and considered a different approach to shaping the future of our profession? Consider for a moment that our operating business model may need to adapt not only to the



consumers we are serving but to the people we desire to employ. For those who are still reading and not on hold, let's open our minds and consider something new.

What if a family met with a professional funeral arranger? A professional funeral arranger can be described as someone who has an outgoing personality, pleasant disposition, is articulate, possesses excellent presentation skills and is creative. Sounds just like the typical embalmer, right? I will breach this line of thought later in this article, but a professionally trained arranger with the aforementioned skill sets could be a change-maker for funeral homes. I will acquiesce (accept without fighting about it) that this prototype funeral director does exist; however, they are the exception rather than the rule. The family experience is significantly enhanced when an arranger is skilled at communicating and presenting different options for families to choose.

The craft of embalming is highly revered in our profession. However, just as some funeral directors have little to no arranging skills, the same holds true for the embalmer. If you are still reading this article, ask yourself: Does your firm offer embalming with every cremation case? Why not? This point of consternation confirms exactly my thoughts above regarding the employ of professional arrangers. Let's face it, there are many "order takers" making arrangements with a lack of training or creativity, and the results are dismal.

Back to embalmers. I have seen the best and some of the worst. Grandpa looking like he was an Avon model and grandma looking as if she were exiting a car in the now defunct Ringling Brothers show are good analogies. In this example, perhaps dual license requirements are more detrimental than good for our business. Restorative arts is just that – an art. A great embalmer brings a deceased loved one "back to life" for families, and that is priceless to those who matter.

Another thought along the line of qualifications is the "director." Please hang in here with me because this is going to take some very broad vision. Imagine that a family is initially in contact with a funeral director from the first call. Once all of the data are collected (yes, prior to arriving at the funeral home for arrangements), including entry of all death certificate points, a family then meets with a professional arranger.

During this time, the body is in the care of a restorative arts specialist. Upon the completion of arrangements and with the body embalmed, dressed and casketed, the funeral director takes over to carry out the service. Why is this far-fetched?

Unfortunately, the one-size-fits-all notion of a funeral director is outdated. The market has shifted as swiftly as the consumer, yet our education and hiring practices have remained stagnant. Even Chick-fil-A has designated positions. Front-end servers take orders and payments, preparers make the meals and attendants keep the property clean. All employees work under management to create a positive experience.

I firmly believe the funeral profession can operate in the same way. If you're a naysayer and have read this far, I know you're thinking, "We ain't no restaurant" and "Our business is different." No, it's not. In most professions – from hoteliers to physicians – highly trained specialists attend to clients.

This leads to the next segment of this article, which is near

and dear to my heart – training. If our profession is going to flourish, we must initiate practices to ensure that our skills are honed. We are failing miserably in training. There is a significant difference between education and training. Allow me to provide some examples. I can give you a book so you can educate yourself about how to hit a baseball, but you actually have to get in the batter's box to practice your proficiency. Even professional baseball players take batting practice before every game under the watchful eye of a batting coach.

How are you training your funeral directors before every game (funeral)? In the military, a person enlists and attends basic training, then graduates to initiate a career of continuous training. The individual has been trained in basic skills, but their particular assignment job (military occupational specialty) will require elevated training, along with unit training. Proficiency is paramount and a measurement of skill retention. In fact, in order to get promoted, proficiency tests are part of the formula. How are your funeral home employees training and how are you measuring proficiency?

Let's consider our current education and training requirements for the profession. I hark back to the first part of this article and restate that we are all over the place because each state has different requirements. Politically, I don't think this is such a bad idea simply because that is how we are governed. The problem is that requirements are so stringent that they narrow the pool of candidates.

Yes, we do have national board exams, and those should remain intact. Once a funeral director graduates from a funeral education institution and successfully passes board exams (state and national) and completes apprentice requirements, only CEUs are mandated (and yep, they vary from state to state as well). Although CEUs fill a gap and keep funeral professionals updated, I take a different view. Once again, I am



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aware that some will take umbrage at my thoughts, but for sake of broadening the discussion, please continue reading. In my not-so-humble opinion, CEUs have value from the standpoint of providing updated information but little else.

I have presented CEU workshops, attended CEU sessions, and I'll continue to do so. However, the fact of the matter is that most CEU programs have no "teeth," meaning there is not a pass/fail to measure proficiency. The key word here is "proficiency." Attending a CEU session at a conference has value and can provide important insight and ideas on a broad spectrum of topics. But after paying for and signing in for attending, how does the time spent enhance attendees' skills?

The unfortunate reality is that many attendees are simply fulfilling a mandate by sitting in a chair and keeping up with

their friends via Facebook or Instagram. Rarely do I witness much note taking, and depending on the dynamics of the presenter, interaction and participation is usually low.

What if there were a test at the end of the sessions, a “go or no-go” set of questions or oral presentation of facts that would be pertinent to the subject matter as well as relevant to the business? I find it interesting how many courses for different subjects like preneed, OSHA standards and FTC regulations are presented (some even mandated), yet violations are easier to find than Easter eggs on a golf course fairway.

There are literally hundreds of subjects in the funeral profession for which training can be provided to “up the game” of those who play (it’s an analogy folks; I’m being serious here). Why don’t we train? There is a simple yet uncomfortable answer: lack of leadership and know-how. When a firm owner/manager makes the decision to improve his or her staff’s performance and morale, immediate pushback is generally the reception. Trust me, I’ve heard them all, including, “I’m a professional and I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job.”

As a professional trainer, I see the mistakes made by funeral directors, such as misspellings, obit omissions, death certificate errors, etc. As a professional trainer, I conduct research on trainees to understand how to change behavior since training is just that – behavior modification.

But here is where training gets serious: I also research revenue generated per call, both for services and products, cremation and burial. Oh, and by the way, I take a deep dive into accounts receivable. If a leader is going to make a decision to train subordinates, it is a requirement to have substantiated data to back up the reason for training and measure the results afterward. Also, just because you played third base in Little League when you were in fourth grade doesn’t mean you are qualified to be a coach.

The transfer of knowledge into practicum (moving from knowing what to do and being able to teach what to do) requires different skill sets. If you don’t know how to train or coach, either identify a staff member with the skills or hire someone. It’s simple – make a leadership decision to improve staff by training, conduct regular and meaningful training, train to proficiency and then measure the results. By following this formula, you are creating – ready for this? – standards!

The funeral profession in itself has a bright future from the simple standpoint of the increasing death rate among my fellow baby boomers. Adapting to the shifting needs of the families we serve includes making changes to our operational models. Creating new job descriptions for different personnel within our business would be part of the operational changes. By doing so, we can match skill sets and personalities to different touchpoints required of the funeral business.

There are volumes of research that suggest the placement of personality types in positions in which they can flourish. I believe – and of course, I could be wrong; I was wrong once last year – that an introvert making arrangements is certainly a recipe for unhappy families. Perhaps the staff at your funeral home is established; however, taking time to find out exactly what talents your team has will initiate a fresh look for the future.

The most expensive line item on most profit and loss statements is payroll. It’s an investment simply because revenue for the business is a fruit of their labor. Hire a professional to conduct an assessment of your staff to determine if each person is in a position in which they are best suited. If your firm is in the hiring mode, do the same because the new hire’s job description and position on your team needs to be identified for best productivity. Applicants with a license and the background is not an indicator for collaborative success.

What type of training program is in place at your firm for new staff? I’m privy to many instances in which new employees are hired and the training and onboarding are abysmal. This problem is particularly prevalent in funeral homes in which apprentices could be characterized as indentured servants. Washing cars, cutting grass and conducting menial tasks because “it was good enough for me back in the day”



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doesn’t appeal to the pool of qualified applicants in our field.

Additionally, if your training consists of the “follow me and do what I do” method, you’re most likely perpetuating mistakes that should not even be repeated. Creating a step-by-step policy and procedure manual is the first step to organizing your staff for training. When was the last time the manual was updated and used as part of a training platform?

I’m going to take a giant leap by professing that the majority of mistakes made and problems we have managing funeral homes can be solved with training. That’s a bold statement, but consider the last missteps made by staff members and think whether the problem could have been prevented if he or she were properly trained. I know the answer already: “I did train them, but they still screwed up!” Well, maybe and maybe not. If a staffer makes a mistake, most likely it’s because they were not properly trained to proficiency standards. After the first mistake is made, document and retrain to proficiency. If the very same mistake occurs again, the discussion with the employee must be frank to identify the problem – either they don’t have the capacity to learn/retain or they simply do not want to perform. In either event, you’ve made a bad hire.

I am passionate about the funeral profession and elevating our level of service performance to the families that trust us to care for their loved ones. Hiring the right people in the right positions for their skill set, along with consistent training to measure performance, is key to a successful future.

I just handed you the key – now open the door. ☰

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