

By Daniel M. Isard

Step 5: The Staffing Challenge

With an annual loss of more than 1,700 directors with five or more years' experience, will staffing issues be owners' most daunting challenge to come?

In the 1980s, when nationwide rates were 7% or less, I predicted that cremation, coupled with the implementation of itemized pricing (as mandated by the FTC Funeral Rule), would be the biggest challenge funeral service would face in my lifetime.

It's now 2020, I'm still alive, and I was right. So now I'm going to give the next generation of funeral home owners my prediction for the future: The integration of staffing and licensure will be the biggest challenge for the next 40 years on many levels.

This topic falls in line with this month's editorial focus on the new breed of funeral directors. New Bs, as I will refer to them, are our salvation as a profession. Service businesses cannot exist without people!

For 150 years, it seemed that 80% of New Bs came from "Bay Bs" of funeral directors and funeral home owners. Since my entry into the profession in the 1980s, I've seen this number decline from about 50%. Either funeral home owners need to have three or more "Bay Bs" to increase the odds that at least one will follow in their footsteps or we must find a way to attract and retain New Bs. These are my ideas.

LEVEL ONE ATTRACTING NEW BS TO THE PROFESSION

There are about 35,000 licensed people working in 19,000 funeral homes. It doesn't matter if these businesses are private, single-owner funeral homes where the owners live upstairs, multiple locations belonging to a single owner or large conglomerates. This equates to about 1.5 licensees per location.

By my estimate, we lose about 1,750 licensed people with five or more years of experience every year. Our schools are graduating about the same amount, but I assume a 50% attrition rate. We therefore produce 750 to 1,000 people a year to replace the lost 1,750, producing a negative employment rate. Every firm in America should be holding an annual hiring fair.

Why such high attrition? I would contend that this is one of the most difficult professions of all. The av-

erage funeral director is trying to fulfill an almost impossible mission 80 to 100 times a year. Working to get the dead where they must go and the living where they need to be is akin to having two games of tug of war going at the same time. Directors go from being strangers to a family to their most noble servants in less than five days. The family to which they are in service is not one being but many, all with their own agendas and needs. The more dysfunctional the relationship of each family member to the deceased, the more difficult their task of neutral support for all.

I believe many of the New Bs who elect to join this profession don't truly understand the tasks that make up the job. Again, why do we have high turnover?

- Many just want to serve the living, which is wonderful, but most firms do not have a dedicated arranger. They have funeral directors who do everything.
- Many see this as being a lay ministry, but not all families seek a religious answer to their loss.
- Many want the ability to plan their time off, not fully realizing the reality of 24/7/365. Very few firms can provide that guarantee, and many smaller firms have an all-hands-on-deck need.
- Many don't want to work in the informal atmosphere of a privately owned small business. The casual nature of the privately owned business has some benefits, but it also has some weaknesses.
- Finally, many a 39-year-old comes to realize that the decision their 18-year-old selves made, when they were themselves a New B, was wrong, until now.

LEVEL TWO ATTRACTING PEOPLE TO BE LICENSED

What is going to attract New Bs to our profession? Some think education is the pathway; others think it's a wall. One of the big discussion points (with respect to Dr. Jacquelyn Taylor) has always been: Is funeral service a profession (then we should have more education) or is it a business regulated by supply and demand and consumer satisfaction? Should em-

balming be considered a trade? If so, shouldn't it be a totally separate career choice post-mortuary school? After all, didn't most mortuary schools start out as trade schools teaching "the new art of embalming"?

I see states increase college requirements and others reduce them. And as of this writing, 23 states allow a person to be a funeral director with no mortuary school. Forty years ago, every state required a mortuary education for licensure. The trend is obvious.

And yet, with all these alternate paths to entering the profession, we still talk of shortages of good people staying in the profession. Some have theorized that regardless of education and licensing requirements, there are just so many willing to do what funeral directors and embalmers do. Is making it easier by reducing the college prerequisite going to increase the number of people choosing funeral service?

We're guessing at a time we should be certain. Why is it that a person can simply walk up and start working in Colorado, but there are a few states that require a four-year college degree, plus mortuary school?

I realize I'm using the extremes, and most states lie between the two positions, but that's my point. Why does what state you live in matter? If we don't know, why not have a unified approach to this business?

Another thing I know for sure is that there are 23 states that require you to be licensed as an embalmer to be able to make funeral arrangements. (And just in case, I am not anti-embalmer; I am pro-funeral service!) For those who want to specialize in the front of the house, those required embalming skills need to be eliminated. If someone chooses to develop those skills, that's fine; the education is available. While fewer bodies are being embalmed, there is still a need for 100% of all deaths to have an arrangement.

LEVEL THREE RETAINING PROFESSIONALS

To retain people, employers must do four things:

1. *Compensate properly* Why did I put the money first? If you have to ask and you are an employer, I'll bet your people are underpaid. If you're asking and you are an employee, you probably think you're underpaid. Fair, reasonable compensation must be paid to all. Those better at doing their jobs will get paid more. However, if we pay fairly but don't have enough New Bs, compensation will increase out of control.

2. *Educate to keep skill levels high* If you think smart employees are expensive, try figuring out how much dumb ones cost you! We must have well-educated, well-trained staff. Employers that can afford to bring training in-house have an advantage. Another option is your state or national association, and there are many training opportunities on the internet if timing is an issue. Sending staff to state, regional or national conventions is an added opportunity for education and demonstrates respect for the employee.

3. *Develop a good work environment* People spend nine hours a day at least five days a week working in a funeral home. Can you imagine walking around for 2,000 hours a year with a pebble in your shoe? Get rid of the pebbles and make the workplace comfortable. People will appreciate it.

4. *Provide authority and responsibility to all employees* Staff is there so owners don't have to do everything themselves. The more qualified the staff, the more they will happily take authority and responsibility for getting things accomplished.

5. *Give written reviews at least annually* When a staffer makes a mistake, we tell them. But do we objectively tell them what they do *and* don't do well? That is called a review, which compares performance to job description. This allows someone to grow.

Good employees like to learn and get better. Are there some who cannot get better? Unfortunately, yes. Some should not be in the profession or in your employ. That's another reason we need more New Bs.

LEVEL FOUR RETIRING WITH DIGNITY

Few careers are as life encompassing; working in this profession exposes you to the best and worst of mankind. Few have a career whereby they affect their community more than funeral directors do, but there is a price for it. The needs of the community are often put ahead of your own needs, and much of this is financial sacrifice.

Nothing is sadder than a funeral director who cannot afford to retire. As an owner, what are you doing to help someone save money for retirement? We need to make sure we offer tax-qualified retirement plans as part of a total compensation package and should help our staff understand how to invest their money within the plan to aid in their retirement. It's important to provide ways to support the option of your staff retiring someday.

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