

Dream Team



THE RIGHT SKILLSETS FOR SUCCEEDING IN HIGH CREMATION MARKETS



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A "TEAM" ... IT HAS BECOME COMMON PRACTICE

for many leaders to use this term when talking about their staff to help build morale and reinforce that it takes everyone working together to reach the organization's goals. In a profession that has long been dominated by a top down approach where your name need be "on the sign" to have influence, I believe the team concept is a good analogy and a step forward for our profession. That said, it is important to understand that as an owner or manager, your role on this team is to be the coach. Your primary function is to direct, instruct, and train each member of your team in the role you need them to fill.

Stepping back a bit, let me ask you a question ... "what does a dream team look like in your mind?" Perhaps it is centered around "A" players - people who are biased toward action, who have accountability, zero excuses, those who 'think like an owner'? Perhaps it involves a culture of trust and accountability, flexibility and strong communication? And with these star players and great culture, we would undoubtedly have a team that fails fast and succeeds faster, one where there is a desire to not

only protect the culture but to EVOLVE the culture so we keep winning. This would be a team that continues to attract top talent.....a true dream team!

So then how do we go about building a dream team? To be successful in high cremation markets, or any market really, the first step is to identify the skillsets needed and then create a strategy to help our players consistently perform at their highest potential. In high cremation markets, in addition to needing licensed staff (depending on state laws) to serve the families, you also need players who are good at sales, marketing, and experience (event) planning. You probably noticed that most of the skillsets identified here are focused on the revenue side of your business, that is intentional. As owners/managers, we are naturally focused on monitoring expenses closely, so I am going to assume that skillset is already being incorporated in the team dynamics. Now coach, it is time to drive your team to

focus on growth!

Truthfully, it is probably an easier hurdle to start from scratch and build a team, but that is rarely possible, and every team member has strengths and weaknesses – a new team member just has weaknesses you are not aware of yet. You already have employees on your team and your challenge is identifying what gaps exist

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between their skillsets and those you need to be successful. You must then determine how you can best fill the gaps with new talent or develop existing talent. Finding an A-player, someone who 'just gets it', who is well-rounded and can do it all does happen, but it is a rarity. So rather than talk to you about

how to find and recruit those A-players, I think it is more valuable to look at how you can enhance the team you already have... how do you create your own 'cinderella season'. It starts with you, the coach, and your skillsets as a leader. If you take care of your internal customers, your staff, they will take care of your external customers! Here are a few critical points if you want to build your dream team:

- Lead from the inside out
- It's not what you say, it's how you make them feel
- The road to freedom is a beautiful system

LEAD FROM THE INSIDE OUT

It is true that we lead by example, however it is equally as important that we lead with passion. People are drawn to you first, then to your ideas.

If you want your team to succeed in high cremation markets, you must believe

in the value of cremation yourself. If you come in bemoaning the family who chose cremation, or expressing the woes cremation has created for your business, your staff is going to pick up on that and respond accordingly.

I hear time and time again from owners, leaders, and managers that funeral service is changingand not for the better. Someone said to me once that if anyone asked them about a career in funeral service, they would say "stay away!" Sure, we all have tough days and things are bound to happen that make us frustrated. But ask yourself for the sake of your team, "how often does your team see you lacking in passion and enthusiasm?" Better yet, go back and ask yourself these questions: "What do I believe about funeral service? What do I believe about my business and my people?" "If you do not feel that spark, that excitement when you serve families, then you need to be realistic about your ability to inspire change in others.

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I chose the funeral service profession. As a child, my dream was to change the world. When I started working in funeral service as a career I realized that I might not change the world in one big grandiose way but I had found a way to change the world one family at a time. My passion changed from a global ambition to a local mission, and that passion remains today. I want any team members to see and understand my personal convictions. If they know that at the core of all I do, I am driven by making a difference for those I am serving, then when I talk to them about the importance of sharing options with families, they are not presumptive that the goal is just about selling more. If I want them to step out of their comfort level and change the conversation in the arrangement conference from the ways we 'used to do it', to new ways so that we can hopefully help families understand options and choose to have services, they realize it is not just because I want them to upsell a family. And if I ask them to make changes in the 'back office' processes, I put that in perspective of the families we serve as well. After all, if we are truly going to take care of the needs of families, it has to be all the way through

our processes.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU MAKE THEM FEEL

According to a recent Gallup survey conducted, only about 30% of people feel engaged at work. This means more than two-thirds of your team are not thinking like an owner, they are not holding themselves accountable, and they are not performing at peak level. I want to pause hereimagine what you could accomplish (or the labor savings) if starting tomorrow more than two thirds of your staff increased their output. Wow!

People want to be a part of something of purpose and meaning, and they want to feel they matter - that what they do matters. Funeral service inherently has purpose and meaning and for most of us it is a calling. That said, as leaders and coaches of teams, we still need to be diligent in our efforts to not only inspire but to show people they matter.

A big part of this is being sure that your actions support your words. It is one thing to say to a team member, "you are important" but how do you show them? Do you make it a habit everyday to check in and ask 'how are you doing?'. And then sit and listen and not check the phone.

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I learned a valuable lesson in just how important it is that your actions reflect your words. One apprentice who was working with us had a performance that I would say was mediocre at best. He did what he was supposed to do yet it was always at a 'just good enough' level. I felt like there was more to his capabilities but just could not get anything more out of him. Then one day we sent him to a seminar hosted by a local mortuary college. I did not think it was that big of a deal, but when he came back, the energy and excitement when he burst into my office exclaiming "that was the best seminar communicated the value. I learned so much. "Thank you for investing in me"was it really that simple? Indeed it was. I noticed a change in how he reached out to families, how he engaged with other staff, and in how he was willing to be involved beyond just the

tasks. I had always told him I thought he had potential, I just never showed him. And let me tell you selfishly, seeing that smile on his face was worth every penny of the training. His enthusiasm was catching, and I felt my spirit lifted and I wanted to do more!

Word choice is important as well. Ever been on the receiving end of 'that's a great idea but it will never work here?'. I can tell you as a consultant, although you get used to hearing that, it is still frustrating. As an employee, that must be one of the most disheartening and disappointing things to hear from your leaders. What if instead you heard "That's an interesting idea, and how do you think our families will embrace it?" You may come to the same conclusion that in all honesty, it simply will not work for your market, or you may change your mind and decide it will. Most importantly, you have communicated to your employees "thank you for thinking of how we can grow our business. Thank you for caring about being able to serve our families in the best way. Thank you for being willing to spend time with me discussing this idea. I value you." Little tricks such as simply replacing the word 'but' (which negates anything that comes before it) with 'and' can change the dynamics and direction of the conversation. It may seem like semantics, but words matter - they communicate your intent. If you want employees to think like owners, you have to treat their ideas like those of owners - worthy of a discussion.

Why does this matter for success in a high cremation market? I still believe word of mouth and referrals are the best way to get business regardless of your market dynamics. If you serve your families well and they are satisfied, you hope that they will pass it along. If you serve your employees well, make them feel valued and a part of a bigger team, they will sing your praises to everyone they meet. They will gladly talk about you and all you do, and people will listen.

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THE ROAD TO FREEDOM IS A BEAUTIFUL PROCESS

I borrowed this from an interview with Phil Jackson, arguably one of the greatest basketball coaches of all time. I like it for two reasons - as an engineer, I just

naturally love anything that talks process, and because it seems paradoxical to create a system to allow for freedom. How does that work? It is quite simple, actually.

If I know my 'four squares,' or the boundaries in which I operate, then I understand where I have the freedom to make decisions in each situation. If I am empowered to make decisions, then I am biased to act rather than call to ask permission before doing everything. Now I realize as an owner, the term "empowerment" can be quite scary when you think of the liabilities of your business. By putting processes in place, we enable our team to understand how

things should work and give them the freedom to make decisions within that role as well as an expectation to raise concerns if something happens outside of those boundaries.

One of the most draining parts of leading can be the constant questions that you feel you should not have to answer – 'we need more cremation containers, what should I do?', 'do we want to attend this wellness fair (yes, yes, the answer is always yes!)?', 'The family wants a purple bamboo urn shaped like a flamingo, where do I find that?' Yet, if your team does not know the boundaries of their decision-making capabilities, then these are fair questions. No one wants to make

a mistake and so they will ask 'the boss'.

Who is in charge or re-ordering supplies? What level of dollar amount can they make decisions to spend without approval? How much of their time can be allocated for public relations work? What boundaries and processes do you have in place to give your team the freedom to make these types of decisions?

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People were, are, and always will be our greatest assets and our greatest liabilities. We will always struggle to find and build our dream team (or to retain it if we have it). As my tenure in funeral service grows, my passion is expanding from just changing the world for every family, to creating and sustaining a workplace that allows others to share that same experience. I sincerely believe that if we focus on what we can control as leaders - the vision we set forth, the alignment of our words and actions, and empowering people through systems - we can have a winning culture and a dream team for many years to come.

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