

# Building a Culture of Employee Engagement in Your Funeral Home

by Gregory Ferris, Ed D.

## What if Thinking

What if your funeral home staff gave 100% effort at all times? What if your business increased by 15-20% through those efforts? What if your staff came to work ready to really crank things out every day? And what if you didn't have to feel totally and irrevocably responsible for everything in the funeral home? With the ever increasing challenges in the workplace, changes in death care values, and the external threats of competitors, it is no wonder that funeral home owners are seeking solutions to what if questions. The solution is there, interestingly enough, but funeral home owners might not understand how to bridge the gap between people and potential.

## Thinking About Approach and Outcome

Understanding employee engagement starts when you begin to think how to change the way you lead and manage people. Today's workplace is multi-generational and diversified. Managing across generational needs and expectations is complicated and challenging. The commonly used command (I am the boss) and control (I have all the information) approach fails to motivate and often leads to employee disengagement. Nor does command and control adhere to the basic principles of human needs.

The motivation and emotional requirements of today's employee are largely based on a model created in the 1940's by Abraham Maslow, *Hierarchy of Needs*. At the base of his model are human physiological needs – oxygen, food and water. Just above these are human safety needs – free from the threat of physical or emotional harm. Following are human social needs – interaction with others, and esteem needs – self-respect and achievement. As a human need is mostly satisfied, it no longer motivates and the next higher need takes its place.

## Making the Connection

Building out on Maslow's Hierarchy is the key to employee engagement in the workplace. In *Human Sigma*, 2007, the author's identified four dimensions of employee engagement that validate the Hierarchy:

1. *What do I get* – what resources will be available to me to get the job done and I know what my performance should be.
2. *What do I give* – I am being recognized frequently, skill mastery is emphasized, and others care for me at work.
3. *Do I belong* – My purpose is clear, quality oriented workplace, my input is taken.
4. *How can I grow* – I am encouraged to grow and learn, I know the progress I have made at work.

## Connecting the Funeral Home

While so many funeral home owners seem to reach for change, very few embrace it or see the opportunity for creating value in their business through their employees. Engaging employees is not an initiative or a project with a completion date. It is an every day practice that requires commitment, practice and follow through.

Using Maslow's Hierarchy as a guide and the dimensions for workplace practices, it is critically important that the owner understand new ways of communicating with employees that builds relationships and improves results. Caring for others is an essential piece for building the foundation of intrapersonal relationships in the funeral home and growing family loyalty. Following are ideas to begin building employee engagement culture in your funeral home:

- Caring about employees leads to engagement and positive interactions in the workplace. This does not mean you must *like* everybody. Caring nurtures the groundwork for respect. Without caring, expectations can become overt manipulation and communication can fast become a means for disengagement.
- Being interested in others requires you to move beyond yourself. Understanding that others see themselves as stories and how you communicate your role in their story shows your interest in them. This strong focus reflects what the employee wants and what work is needed.
- There is a difference between knowing what an employee does and seeing what they do. Knowing is the end result where seeing is paying attention to what they are doing and demonstrating interest. Seeing validates the thought that employees are not invisible. Instead, they are part of the whole rather than the sum of the part.
- Listening to others forces you to stop thinking what you are thinking and begin to focus on what you see and listen to. Listening actions help you better understand and gather information for safe a conversational environment and increased engagement.
- Managers who engage take time to reflect on the actions, thinking and accomplishments of employees. Staying neutral on facts and creating stories that communicate positive reflection avoids misunderstandings and problems. Being open to employees by reflection lets them know you are thinking about them rather than being confrontational and reactive in your communication.
- Caring, listening, seeing and thinking are a start. However, extending an invitation for employees to interact creates a learning conversation and the opportunity for the employee to understand individual purpose, master skills and seek autonomy in their work.
- Finally, the engaged funeral home is a change ready workplace where change is open, infectious and impactful to those who work there. It works up and down as well as across the workplace.

Building a culture of engagement in the funeral home is a dynamic process that produces engaged employees who know more, do more and willingly contribute more to the success of the business. The key to building the culture is a defined approach to communication based on Maslow's model of motivation blended with the four dimensions of employee engagement. The success of tomorrow's funeral home must begin today. Bridging the gap between people and potential rest entirely on the culture you build in your funeral home. Start today.

