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Culture Drift is the Real Enemy

Are Funeral Directors Changing Our Funeral Customs?

By Robert L. Pierce

Funeral directors and funeral home owners have traits that seem to be universal. They have an almost fanatical commitment to the quality of service that they provide to their families and their communities. The absolute commitment to quality is a trait that funeral directors share with all successful service providers.

The most successful service providers, the Ritz Carlton for example, successfully integrate their commitment to service into the very essence of their businesses. It is a part of their culture. It is integrated very carefully into their business plans. It is part of their profit objectives, their branding, their marketing, their hiring practices, their maintenance programs, and every other aspect of their businesses. Their commitment to quality is the foundation on which the business is built.

Unlike many other service providers, funeral directors and funeral home owners, for the most part, share the belief that profit and quality of service are some how in conflict. Funeral directors are almost universally embarrassed by the prospect of managing their profitability because they believe that a focus on profit will negatively impact their families. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. Because of their mindset, however, many funeral home owners and managers often fail to integrate their commitment to quality into the culture of their businesses to the degree that other great service providers do. And, their businesses and their families ultimately suffer the consequences of their failure to do so.

The result is that the changes in funeral customs are accelerated, the satisfaction level of our families is diminished and prospects of providing a quality service into the future is weakened.

What is Culture Drift?

For purposes of this article, culture drift is defined as unintended changes that occur in a business that affect the delivery of the company's product, service and/or operations. The cultural changes that we are exploring, however, are only "unintended" when viewed from an organizational perspective. They are not necessarily "unintended" when viewed from the perspective of the "perpetrator."

All businesses suffer to some degree from culture drift. It is a particularly dangerous phenomenon in the funeral industry because it contributes to the changes in funeral customs and permanently changes our economic opportunities.

Culture drift often occurs when an arranging funeral director begins making choices on behalf of "their" families in order to provide services to them based on a particular bias or agenda. While the motives of the arranger may be "pure," their lack of respect for "their" family's choices will, over time, change funeral customs, reduce customer satisfaction, and reduce profits. Even the very best of intentions can have bad consequences.

The phenomenon is prevalent in the funeral industry. Funeral directors tend to have similar personality profiles to those of the ministry. It is not a stretch to imagine a funeral director choosing a "value" service on behalf of the family rather than allowing them to choose a more satisfying service that is based on the family's personal preferences and needs. In fact, if you have several arranging directors on staff, you have at least one, and probably more, who impose their personal perspective on the funeral home's families to some degree.

Culture drift is not always a personality issue. Merchandising has to present the family with clear and satisfying choices that can be made without interference or it puts the arranger in the position of making decisions on behalf of their families. It may look like the arranger is helping the family through the difficult process of arranging a service but it obviously is not. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is little in a funeral business that is less "expensive" than is a failure to present a clear choice to families so that they can construct an event that is both fiscally and personally satisfying.

Culture drift is often most evident in the treatment of cremation families. Cremation

families have the same needs for comfort and closure as burial families. When they are given the same “respect,” they often react similarly to their choice alternatives. Preconceptions of the funeral director, however, often get in the way of meaningful communication. As a result, cremation families often receive a lesser level of service than their family’s needs dictate. The result is a less “satisfied” family (although they often do not understand the opportunity that has been taken from them.) And, the funeral home contributes to the cultural changes that we are going through because they do not respect nor understand the motives of their cremation families.

Culture drift can occur anywhere in the organization. The most expensive in terms of lost profits, at least in the short run, manifest themselves in the arrangement process. Culture can also directly affect revenue when it occurs in the collection process, application of credit policies, telephone etiquette, responses to “price” inquiries, employee administration, and employee and compensation management, among others.

How Does One Find Culture Drift in an Organization?

Based on its label, culture drift usually occurs over a period of time and as such, it is particularly difficult to identify in an organization. It may occur with a change of employees or in response to a price change. It may also occur in response to a change of competitive influences, a news report, a telephone inquiry or an interaction with a family.

It is difficult to locate culture drift in a funeral organization. Arrangement conferences are private. The only way to understand the impact of culture drift is to examine the services of each arranger carefully both in terms of delivery and in terms of changes in service patterns. The effects of culture drift in the arrangement process usually only become evident in a careful study of the “longer term” trends in services.

Culture drift because of its very nature is difficult to detect. Its symptoms are different in every funeral home and, as a result, there is no cookie cutter method of rooting it out. There are, however, techniques that probably have some universal application including:

- * Interview arrangers and other people who deal directly with families
- * Prepare a detailed analysis of contracts by arranger for at least two years
- * Compare the results by arranger for different time periods
- * Explore and explain the differences that are identified

- * Build an interactive plan to correct the deficiencies that are identified
- * Supply training and remerchandising as required
- * Continue monitoring regularly

Although a lot of the process of identifying culture drift is intensely clerical in nature, it is by no means a clerical process. It is a highly interactive process that must look to the very essence of the organization's contract with its families if it is to be effective.

What You Will Find?

The results are always the same. There is invariably a different "culture" for every arranger, some good and some not so good. It is through an understanding of the differences that we can provide better and more responsive services to our families.

Of interest, the business manager's or owner's perception of the company's culture and its actual manifestation are rarely consistent. "Best" arrangers often are not. The statistics of arrangers, where they are monitored, are often misinterpreted because of inaccurate information or inappropriate methods. Further, the results of the studies are often misinterpreted simply because it is easier to believe in an inaccurate perception of reality than it is face reality itself.

Culture drift is expensive, particularly in the funeral industry. It is expensive in terms of lost revenue but, more importantly, it almost always results in a lesser level of service. And, it conditions families to accept a lower level of service, and ultimately, contributes to the change of funeral traditions that we are experiencing.

The beauty of managing one's culture is that one gets a better profit picture, more satisfied clients and happier more focused employees, a very rare trifecta.

Conclusion

The culture of a funeral home is simply the systems and methods that are employed to satisfy the cultural, emotional and closure needs of its families; the very essence of the funeral home's reason for existence. Funeral homes either have to build a culture that identifies and satisfies the needs of its families or someone else will and market share will shift as a result.

The careful communication and monitoring of culture is the single most important aspect of funeral home management. Culture is the least managed aspect of a funeral home because it is hidden from view and because it usually occurs over a long period time. Further, many funeral home owners and managers are personally invested in believing that the culture of the funeral home is as they perceive it. They prefer to rely on a mistaken impression than to address what is, at least initially, an unpleasant realization.

Culture management is an important part of the business planning process. Business owners and managers often associate business planning with the clerical budget process that is employed by the public companies. Business planning is a very different process. It is decidedly family oriented. It is more about culture than it is about numbers, financial statements or expense reduction. Increased profit is simply the byproduct of an increased emphasis on the experience of one's families.

Culture management is a serious part of profit management. It results in revenue and profit being increased rather dramatically but, more importantly, it results in greater customer satisfaction. The message is clear. Either we manage the culture of our businesses, or we become a part of the external forces that are changing our funeral customs.