

**“TALENT WINS GAMES, BUT TEAMWORK AND INTELLIGENCE WIN CHAMPIONSHIPS.” – MICHAEL JORDAN**

As this quote suggests, talent alone does not guarantee that you will win in the long term. Still, you might wonder why I chose a sports quote to relate to funeral service. Both sports and funeral service are zero-sum games when it comes to competition. Someone wins, another loses. In funeral

mourning and memorializing a loved one in very new and different ways, with funeral professionals having to adapt to continue to serve them to the best of their ability. And while I will touch on the pandemic’s impact on recruiting and retaining talent later on, the fundamental principles of put-

2. Place these right people in the right seats.
3. Recognition can be a powerful motivator yet costs nothing.
4. Consider when to compensate and when to promote.
5. Continue to make investments in training and developing your team.

These principles reflect what I believe to be the most important tenets (and practices) in strategically building your winning team for long-term success, and I will provide greater detail and insight into each.

### **THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON YOUR BUS**

What does this even mean? It simply means that your business has an identity, a vision, a culture, a service credo and a standard for how it (read: you) exists and conducts itself. Find and hire people who naturally fit this identity and culture. For example, if you believe in providing high-value service, seek out candidates who also believe in and commit to providing excellent service.

One way to qualify a candidate for something like this is by asking open-ended questions during the interview, such as, “What inspired you to become part of the funeral profession?” or “Tell me about your general views on funeral service.” Then have the discipline to sit back and actively listen to the candidate’s response to learn whether he or she may (or may not) be a fit for your high-value, excellent-service culture. If the candidate responds with, “Well, I am passionate about cremation because I think funeral costs have just gotten out of control,” he or she might be happier working for a direct disposer.

COVID has changed everything, including how our businesses have had to conduct arrangement conferences via Zoom or FaceTime, utilize DocuSign



# It's All About The Team

**Strategy for building a winning one for your firm.**

**BY GABRIEL NGO**

service, we have no control over the death rate in our community in any given year – we can only control how many calls we can secure and serve. One death call for you means one less death call for me as your competitor. Zero sum. The same can be said about competing for and retaining human resources in the funeral service profession.

While the pandemic forced all of us to experience life in new ways in general, it especially forced our client families to experience grief,

ting together your winning team are still as deeply rooted as they’ve ever been.

But rather than editorialize on tactical methods, I’d like to offer a strategic approach to building a winning team. Having been an experiential disciple of the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins in many of my previous roles leading others, some of those ideas are present in the following five hiring and recruiting principles:

1. Get the right people on your bus.

and stream funeral services. Therefore, something else to seriously consider in your search might be whether a new candidate is tech savvy enough for your needs. However, any technical abilities or skills should never overshadow whether that candidate is a cultural and objective fit for your firm. “Hire for attitude and train for skill” definitely applies when seeking candidates.

Another crucial facet of your recruiting approach is to not fear looking outside the profession for candidates who fit. Obviously, licensing requirements vary from state to state, but whenever possible, identifying and recruiting those in other service industries who demonstrate high levels of service aptitude may very well blossom into long-term wins for your business.

Finally, looking for candidates with wide spheres of influence – in other words, will he or she potentially bring calls to the firm? – is an excellent practice. From your part-time attendants to administrators to funeral directors, does every member of your team (or, at minimum, a number of your team members) help bring calls to your funeral home? This last point is critical to the Jordan quote about winning long term and winning “championships.”

### **THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT SEATS**

Now that you’ve got the right people on the bus, it’s also extremely important to identify every team member’s natural talent or unique skill so they’re performing in the right seat. This concept is no different in sports; there are reasons certain athletes play certain positions on a football team and certain runners run in certain slots on a 1,600-meter relay in the Olympics. You may already have the right team members on your bus, but not having them in the right seats could very well prevent your busi-

ness from performing and functioning at its absolute when serving families.

For example, you may already have a funeral director on staff who has a passion for cremation yet can also convey the value proposition of having gatherings and services that are meaningful to families. Why would you not want this arranger to meet with as many cremation families as possible? Likewise, if one of your funeral directors is too direct in his or her communication style, for instance, but is an ace in the prep room, why would you not try to work with the employee to have him or her be the main embalmer for your business?

Knowing your team members’ individual strengths and putting each member in the best position to consistently succeed is a form of the “teamwork and intelligence” to which Jordan’s opening quote refers.

### **STAFF RECOGNITION**

Recognizing the accomplishments of your staff individually can be such a powerful, motivating factor – and monetarily, it costs you nothing. Recognition is more than just spotlighting a tenured employee on his or her work anniversary. Perhaps you have weekly or monthly meetings with your staff. These are perfect opportunities to recognize and celebrate staff accomplishments openly with your team. Sharing positive feedback from a family about a particular funeral arranger during your weekly or monthly staff meeting is an example. Recognition is not limited to licensed staff, of course, as you should also celebrate administrative staff, for example, for making sure that the firm’s merchandise invoices are always paid in a timely manner, ensuring that your business always receives its vendor discount.

These are just a few ways in which verbal recognition in front

of the entire team serves to openly acknowledge individual contributions, celebrate individual accomplishments and reinforce your culture and desired, ideal behaviors.

Every so often, surprising employees by accompanying the verbal recognition with a \$20 Starbucks gift card further emphasizes your appreciation. There is no shortage of workplace studies showing that timely and appropriate recognition of employees leads to fostering a close-knit team environment, increases employee retention and encourages employees to achieve higher levels of productivity.

### **COMPENSATION VERSUS PROMOTION**

Please consider that *you reward performance* by increasing employees’ compensation or giving them a bonus when they meet or exceed expectations. *You promote* employees when they consistently demonstrate leadership behaviors.

Many organizations have ruined either their sales teams or some other department by promoting the wrong people to leadership positions. Companies often confuse or intermingle high performance and individual contribution with leadership. Let’s take sales, for instance. Too often, the best performing sales professional gets the promotion when the current sales manager retires or moves on. Why is this hazardous? The behavioral traits and characteristics that make the individual your top sales performer do not equate to the behavioral traits and characteristics that make a successful sales leader.

With a bit of generalization here, typically, the very best sales professionals are motivated by making money, and it actually is a good driver for this person to be a bit selfish and personally opportunistic in order to be successful. These are not the same behavioral traits and characteristics required for a sales manager or leader to be successful. Sales leaders must be able

to build a successful team and establish a sales culture.

In instances in which the best sales professional becomes the new sales leader, the organization has effectively taken out its best sales producer and put him or her in a sales leader seat that does not fit. As a result, it has potentially ruined two positions in the organization.

Likewise, the best technical accountant is oftentimes given the promotion to controller or chief accounting officer, but within a year's time, the department is experiencing low morale and high turnover. The company did not qualify the internal candidate on leadership capabilities; it instead qualified the employee on his or her technical achievements or merits.

While this perspective goes hand in hand with the principle of "right people, right seats," it is more specific to your mindset and

approach to leadership versus performance and how you strategically think and act when rewarding your employees.

### CONTINUED INVESTMENT IN TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

While utilizing employee recognition costs you virtually nothing, training and development certainly are not free and could be quite expensive. But, you ask, "What if I provide training and development opportunities, and the employee still leaves?" You should also ask yourself what it would cost if you lost a valued employee because you did not invest in training and development.

Studies show that in most instances, it's cheaper to retain an employee than it is to replace him or her, with replacement costs often estimated at 25% of the employee's annual salary. In addition, this 25% does not account for the indirect opportunity costs of lost productivity (from searching for a replacement to the time it takes that replacement to ramp up), the potential loss of revenue and the potential deterioration of general employee morale because the turnover is forcing every team member to work longer hours to fill in the gaps.

So, while continued training and development will cost you money, it is important to view it as an investment in both your employees and your business. Furthermore, it is absolutely key that you be strategic and thoughtful about what you offer as training and development opportunities within your business. The changes to consumers' lives and how they

experience new things as the result of the pandemic has opened up doors for training and development that would benefit you and the entire team.

Families have been demanding that funeral service professionals utilize more technology to make things convenient (and they're willing to pay extra for it) and provide transparency with online pricing. Training and development that improve staff competency and expertise in using technology tools for conducting virtual meetings, arrangement conferences and funeral services can be a great benefit to your business – and developmentally enriching for your employees. Moreover, training and development that immerses staff in commitment to customer service and consumer experience not only benefits your staff but your business as well. Training and development help to greatly reduce employee turnover. And what's the benefit of building a great team if you can't keep the group together?

There are no hard-and-fast secrets to successfully building a winning team. Certainly, having an open culture of communication and engagement among all employees is crucial. The five strategic principles we've discussed here also play key roles in how you maintain the culture and identity of your business. When you make the commitment to your team as their leader by predominantly thinking about and continually working to make the team better, that's when you know you've reached that level of working *on* your business instead of just working *in* it. ☰

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