



# BUSINESS

By Chris Cruger

# Leadership in a Sea of Change

A peacetime army often can be effectively led with good administration and management up and down the ranks, with strong leadership at the top. In wartime, leadership is required at all levels. No one has figured out how to manage people effectively in battle, they simply must be led.

I am not suggesting that funeral service and wartime are one in the same. However, I do think this analogy does highlight the reality of the times we are facing in funeral service. The radical changes that have impacted our profession has often made it feel like we are in crisis mode.

In general, times have been quite good for most of us in funeral service over the past few years. We have been pushed to the limits but have come out better and stronger for it. The pandemic ushered in a new wave of technology, transparency and convenience that had never been seen before, and it has put a new face on the profession. Throughout these past few years, many of you have adapted to meet the needs of the consumer and have been quite successful with higher than “normal” case volume.

As in the military, the macroeconomic environment, coupled with the chal-

lenges facing funeral service, requires a higher degree of leadership today. It's easy to manage through the good times, but in times when volume is down, costs are skyrocketing, and there are staffing nightmares, it is leadership that makes the difference.

There is a clear difference between leadership and management. Not all managers are leaders, and not all leaders are good managers. Management is the how and when, while leadership is the what and why. In good times, management is fine with a little direction. In times like we are facing today, it is important that we convey what and why to our entire organizations (and our profession).

Management brings a degree of order and consistency to an organization. It creates the daily routine. Leadership, however, is dealing with change and the external environment. Because of the

pace of change in our profession, leadership has never been more important than it is today.

Many of you are required to wear the hats of both leaders and managers. The challenge is knowing which hat to wear and when. In difficult times (organizationally and financially), having a clear plan and direction is more critical than ever. I believe having a written plan is one of the most critical tools for future success. The simple act of taking time to lay out your plans is a step that too many of us never take the time to do.

Leadership is about setting a direction, being a guiding light, doing the things that others don't and setting the proper example. I believe there are several key traits a leader possesses. While some can be developed, most people must arrive at their own style based on self-reflection, authentic communication and continuous feedback. Particularly in difficult

times, no one person can be expected to have all the answers, but through preparation you can improve your chances considerably.

Here are some of the most essential traits of leaders today:

## OBJECTIVITY

In a time where there is so much change and disruption, objectivity is one of the most critical skills you can have. It is far too easy to fall into a zone of comfort and be blind or unwilling to recognize change. If you can see a situation from all sides and remove emotion from your assessment, you will be operating from a position of power. All too often, people are unwilling to see situations from the eyes of others. When you can put yourself in the shoes of others and achieve win-win outcomes, that is a true sign of leadership.

## CONFIDENCE

Confidence is another key aspect in leadership. If you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will either. All too often we associate leadership with a title, yet it all begins from within. When we are navigating difficult times, the people around us are looking for confidence and reassurance that they are doing the right things.

People like to work with and admire leaders who are confident, yet humble. There is always a natural tendency to trust people more when they are confident. Typically, we associate confidence with competence. So naturally, when a leader exhibits confidence, it makes it easier to trust a leader, and people want to work with a leader they trust.

Humility goes a long way as well. Be willing to learn what you don't know. Be willing to ask the hard questions of the organization and of yourself.

## COMMUNICATION

In times of change, the ability to communicate and convey your message is key. It is a skill that can be practiced and developed. Communication is essential in all organizations because it bridges the "what and why," with the "how and when." When you have those things working together, with a plan, you and your team will be unstoppable.

Clear and direct communication is essential. Don't send directions to your team in jargon or using unclear language. Be transparent and concise and make sure you are providing clear direction.

Take the time to communicate with your entire team. If you take the time to communicate clearly from the beginning, you can save everyone a tremendous amount of time and energy. If done right from the start, it can spark creativity and foster organizational growth.

All too often we assume that everyone is doing the right things, efforts are aligned, and people are content. The reality is that they often are not. If you want people to live the "what and when," you must communicate openly with your team.

Make sure you communicate empathetically, it improves engagement. Employees who feel both valued and empowered to do their jobs well usually have an emotional connection with the community and your company. Effective leaders need to understand the fears, hopes and concerns of those who work for them. Employees who feel empowered are typically employees who care.

## DECISION-MAKING SKILLS

The ability to handle a difficult decision and handle it head-on is a simple differentiator between success and failure. A big part of leadership is making the difficult, and often most important, decisions. You can enlist help in your decision making, but you must be definitive and clear in your decisions.

Here is a seven-step decision-making process:

1. **Articulate the issue.** Identify the issue and what decision needs to be made.

2. **Gather information.** Do extensive research and gather all relevant background information.

3. **Identify your options.** What are the most likely decisions and/or outcomes?

4. **Evaluate the information.** How does the information you've gathered align with the options you've identified?

5. **Make a decision.**

6. **Implement the decision.** Take all necessary steps to ensure the decision is made and followed. Ensure there is appropriate accountability.

7. **Review your decision.** Constantly refine as you go and evaluate your results for future needs and success.

## POSITIVITY

As a leader, the tone you set through your actions, words and the little things is what will radiate through the organization. If you are a "glass is half-full" kind of person, that tone will resonate through your organization. Be that positive influence!

I started sending out daily inspirational messages to family, friends and colleagues a few years back. The messages are all about gratitude, self-awareness and being a good person. As time has passed, I have had all sorts of folks ask to be included in this daily ritual. I had no idea how impactful these little notes could be until we had email server issues and the daily inspirations weren't being received. I was shocked at the immediate feedback.

Having a positive attitude and outlook is not a part-time assignment. It is a lifestyle that translates in your organization. Are you part of the solution or the problem? If you are hanging your head as you walk around the funeral home, it should be no surprise that those around you will do the same. You set the tone!

Compassionate and supportive leadership is vital to inspiring confidence in employees and reassuring them in difficult and uncertain times. Concerted efforts to support and maintain employee wellbeing are crucial to morale and achieving goals. When times are tough, it is critical to understand the environment around us and allow that to shape our actions.

Take a moment to reflect upon your life experience. I am sure you have seen good and bad leaders over the years. Allow that reflection to shape the leader you want to be. You don't need to have all the answers, but you must be willing to work for it. Be willing to work to become the leader you want to be. You need to be able to inspire for the future and set the course in these challenging times. You must provide a goal and motivate others with that sense of purpose. If you can do that, the other noise and challenges will all be muted as you continue to serve your community. •