

# BUSINESS AND FINANCE

BY CHRIS CRUGER

## Sharing Lanes

Interdisciplinary collaboration is a competitive advantage in the funeral service and cemetery professions.

**I**n the January 2026 issue of *The Director*, I, arguing that personalization would define success in 2026 and beyond, challenged you to stand out. I urged you to move past sameness and create experiences that feel authentic, intentional and human. Well, in this month's column, I will address how to accomplish this.

Personalization does not happen in isolation. It cannot be owned by one department, one leader or one role. The most meaningful, differentiated experiences are created when people with different expertise, perspectives and responsibilities work together toward a shared goal. This is where interdisciplinary collaboration comes in.

In today's funeral service and cemetery professions, the complexity of business has outpaced the siloed way in which many organizations still operate. Operations, sales, marketing, preneed, finance, leadership, etc., no longer can function in separate lanes. Families do not experience your business in parts – they experience it as a whole. Thus, the firms that win in 2026 will be those that recognize this reality and intentionally build collaboration into how they operate, communicate and lead.

### THE COST OF WORKING IN SILOS

Most owners with whom I speak don't intentionally create silos. Silos usually emerge naturally as businesses grow. Roles become specialized. Departments become busy. Communication becomes transactional.

The result is familiar: preneed teams operating independently from at-need teams; cemetery and funeral departments working side by side but not together; marketing feeling disconnected from operations; and company leadership making strategic decisions without cross-functional input.

Although each group might be performing well on its own, the organization, as a whole, will underperform. The cost of fragmentation shows up everywhere. Families receive inconsistent messaging. Opportunities for education and trust-building are missed. Moreover, internal frustration mounts, causing

staff to feel disconnected from the bigger picture and stalling the execution of strategic initiatives.

Most importantly, personalization suffers. You cannot deliver a personalized experience to families when your own team's experience is fragmented.

### COLLABORATION AS BUSINESS STRATEGY, NOT A BUZZWORD

Interdisciplinary collaboration often is framed as a "culture" initiative, i.e., something nice to have if time allows. In reality, it is a business strategy with direct financial and operational implications.

When teams collaborate effectively, decisions improve because more perspectives are considered. Execution becomes smoother and faster because employees feel a sense of ownership, not just responsibility. And, ultimately, families experience continuity and confidence, increasing trust both internally and externally.

In today's environment, where consumer expectations are rising and margins are under pressure, collaboration is not optional. It is a requirement for scale, sustainability and growth. The areas where interdisciplinary collaboration can have the greatest impact are:

**1. The Family Experience.** Families don't distinguish between departments. They don't care who "owns" which process. They care about how the experience feels – from first contact to aftercare.

True collaboration ensures that your preneed promises align with your at-need delivery and that your cemetery options are introduced thoughtfully rather than reactively. Moreover, when communication is consistent across touchpoints, no one feels as though they are being "handed off."

When teams collaborate, families feel guided rather than managed. That feeling drives satisfaction, referrals and long-term loyalty.

**2. Preneed and At-Need Programs.** Preneed is not a separate business line – it is a continuation of service. However, many organizations keep it isolated, creating disconnects that undermine trust. Collaboration

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among preplanners, funeral directors, cemetery counselors and operations staff ensures clear, accurate expectations and seamless transitions. This, in turn, creates greater confidence in advance planning and fewer service breakdowns.

The most successful preneed programs I have seen are not the most aggressive; they are the most integrated.

**3. Marketing and Operations.** Marketing should never promise what operations cannot deliver. Similarly, operations should never be surprised by what marketing promotes. Collaboration between the two helps align messaging with reality and strengthens your brand credibility. In addition, it improves staff buy-in and prevents internal resentment.

Your marketing should reflect who you actually are. This requires constant dialogue between the people telling your story and the people delivering it.

**4. Leadership and Frontline Teams.** Leadership sets direction, and frontline teams live the consequences. Collaboration between leadership and staff improves decision-making and builds trust by increasing accountability.

Such integrated efforts encourage innovation. The best ideas rarely come from leadership alone; they come from the people doing the work every day – as long as there's space for them to speak up.

## COLLABORATION REQUIRES STRUCTURE, NOT JUST INTENTION

Now, the effects outlined above sound great, but good intentions are not enough to make them a reality. Interdisciplinary collaboration happens by design, which means you must establish clear communication channels. This entails holding regular cross-functional meetings; sharing company goals and metrics; and establishing mutual accountability.

Without structure, collaboration becomes informal, inconsistent and dependent upon personalities. With structure, it becomes sustainable. To accomplish this sustainability, ask yourself:

- Where do teams naturally intersect?
- Where do breakdowns occur?
- Who owns “handoffs”?
- How often do departments actually talk to one another, not just report to one another?

Remember, you must design collaboration the same way you design your business operations: intentionally.

In addition, understand that collaboration rises or falls with leadership. Your team will collaborate only to the extent that you do. Leaders who truly value collaboration model it themselves by inviting differing perspectives, sharing information openly, and rewarding teamwork – not just individual performance.

On the other hand, leaders who undermine

collaboration generally make decisions in isolation, favor certain departments over others, reward speed rather than alignment, and avoid constructive tension.

Finally, one of the most damaging dynamics in any organization is the subtle “us-versus-them” mindset. Areas where you might see this are funeral service versus cemetery channels, sales versus operations, and leadership versus staff. Over time, this mentality can erode trust and limit business growth. Replacing it requires using shared language, communicating shared goals and working toward shared successes. When people understand how they contribute to the whole, silos begin to dissolve.

## COLLABORATION AND THE FUTURE

The funeral service and cemetery professions are continually evolving – in terms of not just consumer expectations but also business complexity. Technology, data, regulation, staffing challenges and changing demographics all demand integrated thinking. No single role has all the answers.

As you move through 2026, I encourage you to reflect on where silos might be limiting your firm's potential and how interdisciplinary collaboration could improve outcomes for both families and staff. If you need to intentionally design structure to enable greater teamwork, start small by clarifying handoffs, outlining leadership expectations and bringing departments together for shared problem-solving.

Speaking of leadership, remember that leaders must listen more than they talk and model collaboration at the leadership level.

The firms that thrive will not be the ones with the best facilities nor the most aggressive marketing – they will be the ones that work together the best. When your team is aligned, your message is clear, your service is strong and your business is positioned to succeed for the long term. Working together isn't just good culture – it's good business.

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