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## Leading Funeral Service Into a New Era

**Funeral directors must see themselves not as order takers but as the ones who make meaning possible.**

By Calvin M. Amato

**T**he quiet era of funeral service is over. For too long, we have been taught to approach our work from the shadows, to blend into the background of the arrangement room, to let the family lead while we remain neutral observers. We have been told that invisibility is professionalism and that the less we embed ourselves in the memory of a service, the better we have done our job.

But invisibility is not humility. It is absence. And absence serves no one. A grieving family does not need an empty space where a leader should be. They do not need a caretaker so cautious and subdued that they leave the arrangement room with the same limited ideas with which they arrived.

What they need is *presence*. They need someone who can hold the weight of their loss in one hand and the possibility of meaning in the other. They need someone who has the skill and courage to show them what is possible when honoring a life is treated as sacred work, not as a mechanical process.

The funeral service profession is not about simply fulfilling requests. It is about revealing options that families never

knew existed, about taking what they believe is possible and expanding upon it until it becomes something they could not have imagined on their own.

When we step forward with confidence and clarity, we change the conversation. A request for direct cremation becomes an opening to create a private gathering filled with storytelling, music, and even food and drink. A graveside service becomes an opportunity to invite community participation, to weave traditions into a farewell that now feels deeply personal. When approached with imagination,

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If we are to carry this profession into its next era, we must reject the passivity that has defined so much of its history. We must be willing to stand in the center of the experience and lead – not for the sake of personal recognition but because we understand that leadership in this work is an act of service in itself. Families will not ask for what they do not know exists. They will not challenge the limits of tradition if we do not first show them that those limits can be moved. And they will not remember us if all we offer is the bare minimum required to complete the transaction.

The future belongs to those who show up fully and who allow their presence to be felt and their perspective to guide the process. It belongs to those who sit with a family, listen deeply and craft an experience that reflects the fullness of the life being honored.

This requires more than technical skill. It requires the willingness to be known. It requires the steadiness to hold space for both sorrow and possibility. It requires us to see ourselves not as order takers but as the ones who make meaning possible.

We are not here to provide services in the most efficient way possible. We are here to create encounters with remembrance that are impossible to forget. That is the true measure of our value. And it begins the moment we step out from the background and claim our place as leaders who are visible, trusted and unafraid.

### WHY PRESENCE IS NEEDED MORE THAN EVER

There was a time when funeral service could survive on tradition alone. The public's expectations were fixed, and the role of funeral professionals was to execute those expectations with quiet precision. But that time has passed. We now live in an age where families are no longer bound by the rituals of the past; where loyalty to a single funeral home has eroded; and where every decision is weighed against convenience, cost and personal meaning.

**Presence is the antidote to invisibility. It's what sets a professional apart in a marketplace saturated with options.**

In this environment, a funeral service professional who is invisible will be overlooked. An experience that is impersonal will be replaced. And a service that is interchangeable with one offered by the firm down the street will be forgotten before the flowers have wilted. Presence is the antidote to invisibility. It's what sets a professional apart in a marketplace saturated with options.

Presence is not about being louder. It is about being unmistakable in the way you engage, speak and carry yourself

in moments when people are seeking someone to steady them. It is about making a family feel as though they are in the hands of someone who understands them, someone who will not allow their farewell to be a hollow formality.

When you bring this kind of presence into the arrangement room, the conversation changes. A family that enters with the assumption that they will choose the simplest option begins to imagine something more. They hear you speak about the ways in which a farewell can reflect a personality, a legacy, a story, and they begin to picture what that could look like for their loved one. They see that you are not there to push them through a list of products and packages. You are there to help them shape a moment in time that will matter to them for the rest of their lives. That shift happens when you are willing to bring yourself fully into the interaction. Without that willingness, the conversation rarely moves beyond the surface.

The danger of remaining in the shadows is that you become replaceable. Families will not feel compelled to return because they will not remember what made you different. They will not recommend you to others because you will have left them with nothing to describe except the outcome – and outcomes can be replicated by anyone.

What cannot be replicated is the way you make someone feel. That feeling comes from presence. It comes from knowing that the person they trusted with their most vulnerable moments brought not only skill but also vision, attention and care that went beyond the mechanics of the service.

In the funeral service profession, the value of our work is measured not only in the technical tasks we complete but also in the depth of the experiences we create. And the depth of an experience is inseparable from the depth of the professional who shapes it. If we are to remain relevant, if we are to remain essential, we must stop being the quiet facilitators and start being the guides who shape the very way families remember their loss.

### THE LINK BETWEEN PRESENCE AND PERSONALIZATION

Personalization has become one of the most overused words in funeral service but, for many professionals, it remains one of the least understood. True personalization is not about selecting a different flourish for the memorial folder or adding a favorite song to the playlist. Those details matter, but they are surface-level gestures unless part of a deeper design that reflects the person being honored.

Real personalization begins when the professional has the presence and courage to guide a family past the default; to ask the questions that reveal the essence of the life lived; and to translate those answers into something tangible, meaningful and unforgettable.

Presence creates the space for those conversations to happen. Family members will not open themselves to possibility if they do not trust the person sitting across from them. That trust is not earned through politeness alone; it is earned through a combination of confidence, empathy and vision.

It is earned when the professional demonstrates that, rather than simply taking an order, they are helping the family create an experience that will carry emotional weight long after the service is over.

When you show up fully in that way, the family begins to share stories, describe quirks and recall moments – all of which become the raw material for a farewell that truly belongs to them.

Without presence, personalization is reduced to a checklist. With presence, it becomes a collaboration between the professional and the family that is shaped by a shared commitment to honor the life in a genuine way. This is how a direct cremation can be transformed from a transaction into a moment of meaning. It is how a graveside service can be elevated to an intimate gathering that speaks to the heart of the community. It is how a chapel service can be interwoven with traditions, symbols and experiences that connect generations. These possibilities only emerge when the professional refuses to settle for the minimum and is willing to invite the family into a conversation about what more can be done.

The reality is that many families do not know what is available to them. They do not know that a service can be designed around a loved one's passions, culture or legacy. They do not know that there are ways to make the farewell deeply personal, even with limited resources. They do not know because no one has told them.

This brings our responsibility as professionals into focus. If we do not share the possibilities, then we are complicit in families' acceptance of less than they deserve. And if we do not carry ourselves with a level of presence that inspires trust and curiosity, they might never feel comfortable exploring those possibilities.

Personalization is not a luxury. It is not an upgrade to be offered only if time or budget allows. It is the core of what makes our work worthwhile. And it begins with us. It begins with the way we enter the room, the way we speak, the way we listen and the way we invite the family to see beyond the obvious. When we bring ourselves fully into the arrangement process, personalization is no longer an afterthought. It is the natural outcome of a relationship built on trust, vision and the refusal to settle for anything less than a meaningful farewell.

### LEADING FAMILIES BEYOND THE BARE MINIMUM

Settling has become one of the most dangerous habits in our profession. Too often, we mistake a family's first request as their final decision and accept it without exploring whether it is truly what they want. In doing so, we reduce our role to that of an order taker – someone who records a preference and processes it through a standard system. That is not directing. That is not guiding. And it is certainly not the kind of work that shapes a lasting legacy for the family or the professional.

Directing means leading. It means taking on the responsibility of expanding a family's understanding of their options. It's not upselling for the sake of profit but ensuring families

have the opportunity to create something that carries meaning.

This is especially vital when it comes to cremation. For years, cremation has been presented as the "simple" or "affordable" choice, stripped of ceremony and offered as a quick alternative to traditional burial. But cremation is not the end of possibility. It can be part of a rich and meaningful farewell, so long as we have the presence and courage to guide the family in that direction.

One of the most powerful ways to do that is by reframing the conversation entirely. Don't ask, "Do you want services with the cremation?" Instead, ask, "Would you prefer cremation before or after the services?" This simple shift in wording carries the implication that services will take place and positions them as an expected and natural part of the process. It invites the family to think about the timing rather than the existence of the ceremony and opens the door to discussions about memorial gatherings, viewings or celebrations of life that they might not have initially considered.

From there, the task is to show them what is possible. We can speak about the closure that comes from seeing an individual one final time before cremation. We can describe ways to weave storytelling, music or cultural traditions into the gathering so it feels like a true reflection of the life lived. We can suggest incorporating symbolic acts, such as lighting candles, planting trees or releasing butterflies, to help create a sense of shared participation and healing. Even if the budget is tight, there are countless ways to elevate the farewell beyond the bare minimum.

**Personalization is not a luxury. It is not an upgrade to be offered only if time or budget allows. It is the core of what makes our work worthwhile.**

Refusing to settle means never allowing the conversation to stall at "just" a direct cremation, "just" a graveside service or "just" a simple ceremony. It means remembering that every arrangement is an opportunity to create something that will matter to those left behind for decades to come. It means taking pride in the title of funeral director and embracing the authority and responsibility that comes with it. Families look to us for leadership, whether they say it outright or not. When we offer it with confidence and compassion, they respond with trust – and trust is the foundation for creating something meaningful.

We must see ourselves not as neutral processors of grief but as architects of experiences that can either comfort or haunt those who attend them. Every service we lead shapes the way people think about death, memory and the role of ritual in their lives. That is a responsibility too great to meet with passivity. To settle is to squander the chance to create

meaning in the face of loss. To lead is to honor both the living and the dead with the dignity they deserve.

### THE PROFESSIONAL'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Every service we arrange exists on two timelines. In the immediate sense, it is a deeply personal moment for the family before us, the singular opportunity to honor a life in a way that will never come again.

In a broader sense, however, it is part of the living history of our profession. The way we serve today will shape how families think about funeral service tomorrow. It will influence the trust they place in us, the stories they tell their communities and the standards they expect the next time they walk through a funeral home's doors. Each choice we make to lead or to retreat, to personalize or to process, is a vote for the kind of profession we will hand down to the next generation.

If we allow our work to be reduced to transactions, we teach the public that our role is optional and that anyone can do what we do. If we treat direct cremation as the default without offering ceremony, we signal that ritual is an accessory rather than an essential part of the grieving process. If we stop asking questions, stop offering ideas, stop showing families the possibilities, we actively dismantle the value of the very profession we claim to defend. That is how relevance is lost – not through sudden collapse but through gradual neglect.

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Shaping the future requires a conscious choice to protect and elevate the role of funeral director. We must be visible, engaged and unapologetically committed to the belief that what we offer matters. With a balance of confidence and humility, we must lead families by always listening and never shrinking from our responsibility to guide. We must treat each arrangement as part of a larger movement to redefine what meaningful farewells look like in the 21st century.

This is why presence matters. This is why personalization matters. This is why we must never settle for the minimum. Every time we step into the arrangement room, we shape not only the experience of the family in front of us but also the expectations of the next family with whom they speak. We influence how our communities think about grief, memory and the value of ritual. And we either strengthen or erode the foundation for those who will follow in our footsteps.

There will always be those who resist change, who cling to the way things were done decades ago. There will always

be those who argue that innovation dilutes tradition, that offering too many options confuses families, that stepping forward with too much presence distracts from the service.

But the truth is that tradition only survives when it is adapted. The most enduring rituals are those that have been reshaped over generations to reflect the values and realities of the people they serve. Our task is not to preserve the past in amber. Our task is to ensure that the essence of what makes funeral service meaningful is carried forward – alive, relevant and capable of speaking to the hearts of those who need it.

The future of this profession will not be written by those who stay quiet. It will not be shaped by those who see their role as merely administrative. It will belong to those who lead with presence, create with purpose and treat every ceremony as an opportunity to set a new standard. That is our responsibility. That is our legacy. And the time to claim it is now.

### THE CALL TO RISE

There will come a day when each of us is remembered not for the titles we held nor the contracts we signed, but for the moments we stood between grief and the people who carried it. On that day, no one will recall the packages we sold or the number of calls we answered. They will remember whether we were the one who asked the question that opened the door to their healing. They will remember whether we gave them the permission to imagine something more than they thought possible. They will remember whether, in the midst of chaos, we carried ourselves with the presence of someone who understood that their loss was the beginning of their forever-changed life.

This profession is not drifting toward change; it is accelerating toward it. The question is whether we will be passengers or pilots. We can remain bystanders, letting families choose from a menu they did not design, or we can stand at the front and help them write the script to their final memory with someone they love. We can hide behind the comfort of familiarity, or we can walk into the unknown with the courage to lead. In doing so, we not only serve our own careers but also protect the future of the profession itself.

To bet on yourself in this work is to believe that your presence has the power to change the way a family experiences loss. It is to trust that your voice, your vision and your leadership matter enough to shape the course of a farewell. It is to reject the easy path of neutrality and embrace the risk of stepping forward. When you step forward, you are no longer just an employee or facilitator – you become the living embodiment of what funeral service can be at its highest standard.

Every generation inherits the profession from the one before it. What we will hand down is being built by the choices we make today. If we choose to settle, the future will settle with us. But if we choose to lead, to create, to inspire; if we choose to bet on ourselves and the value we bring, then we

will leave behind a profession worthy of the trust that has been placed in it for centuries.

That is the work worth doing. That is the legacy worth leaving. And that is the call we must answer – not someday, but now.

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## Tomorrow Today

The development of future funeral service leaders is increasingly urgent in this time of swift change.

By Edward J. Defort

**W**e are living in an era of “hypertransition,” meaning that in the time it takes to implement a change, we should already be finalizing what’s next. For example, if a business today has a five- or 10-year plan, the plan likely will be out of date within the next 18 months. This breakneck pace is how Avi Olitzky framed his presentation, “Developing the Next Generation of Funeral Professionals,” at the recent NFDA Leadership Conference.

Olitzky is a nationally respected strategist, speaker and consultant who helps clients navigate change and position themselves for long-term success. “We all know that change is difficult, but it’s a necessity,” he said.

Serving as senior rabbi of one of the largest synagogues in North America, Olitzky began his career in the pulpit. This experience shaped his deep understanding of leadership. He noted that his closest friends were funeral directors during his 20 years as a congregational rabbi. “They were the ones that would stay with me after the family left so that we could complete the burial,” he said. “They were the ones that I trusted, providing pastoral care when I wasn’t in the room.”

### THE PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE

To keep up with the frenetic pace of change in today’s markets, finding good leaders is key. “Leadership-development updates have to happen at least quarterly,” Olitzky said. “That’s internally and externally.”

Consider the demographics. NFDA statistics indicate that many funeral directors plan to retire within the next five years. “Retirement is when we close this chapter and start another one,” he said. “And so many of those of us who are in a family business, we’re not going out and looking to fill this role necessarily. Many of us are looking to pass it on to the next generation.”



In this era of hypertransition, people are closing chapters sooner. “If we talk about the generation that entered the workforce in the 60s, the 70s, the 80s and even the 90s, maybe they held two to three jobs over the course of their career,” Olitzky said. “Today, the average person who entered the workforce in the past 10 years will change their job and their career seven to 12 times. That’s crazy, but it’s real.”

Olitzky does a lot of work in the sociology space. Many of his clients are associations and their members. He observes trends, he looks at people, and he tries to partner with those who want to make the world a better place. To do that, we can’t proceed as though it’s “business as usual.”

“We know that almost 8,000 annual job openings will happen over the next six years in this space,” he said, “not in general, in *this* space.”

Olitzky cited the American Board of Funeral Service Education statistic that enrollment in mortuary science school hit a peak three years ago that had never before been seen. “People were studying mortuary science; people were studying deathcare,” he said. But who are these people?

Millennials. Olitzky predicts that 75% of the direct-care workforce will be millennials within the next five years. “I’m not going to pass judgment on generations or what that looks like with that seven-to-12-job career change, but that’s part of it,” he said.

Most millennials treat their employment as their job, not their work, meaning they are simply clocking in and clocking out.

“Whether we see that as a bad thing or a good thing is neither here nor there, but the way that we plug in and relate to our organization is exactly how we have to begin developing those leaders,” Olitzky said. “We want to convince them that this is part of their lifeblood ... meeting people in their most challenging moments.”

Currently, 70% of new enrollees in mortuary science programs are women. Although this is the reality, Olitzky noted that the room where he was delivering his presentation didn't reflect that. “Historically, the leaders in this space have been male, and the door is being blown wide open,” he said. “We have to help others walk through and develop and not just simply pass on things the way they have been.”

Olitzky stated that those who merely say they have a succession plan or those who intend to go home and map out a plan could already be behind. “That's not a doomsday prophecy nor is it suggesting that there's no chance,” he said. He likened his succession-planning philosophy to the three “rules” of real estate – location, location, location. The three rules of succession planning, however, are yesterday, yesterday, yesterday.

“When you leave here, you need to be having this conversation with someone else, too, not just yourself,” he said.

Overall, the mindset of funeral service professionals has changed because the workforce has changed. It used to be, “Bigger is better.” Make more money, serve more people and expand your footprint. However, the measure today is intimacy: How many touches do you have with each family? How many long-term relationships have you developed?

Although Olitzky was a congregational rabbi, he often would be called to meet with families that did not have a house of worship or faith community. “And you know who was there for them? The funeral directors,” he said. “And you know who usually met with them? The youngest staff, because they were the ones who had more time and more energy and were more willing.”

He continued: “Transparency, personalization and, of course, professionalism are what we have to start engendering in that next generation. It also means that you need to be not only keeping up with the times but leading the times.”

## GOALS VS. STRATEGIES

Olitzky asked the audience whether they send daily, monthly or annual messages of condolence to the families they've served. He then asked if they have a phone app to connect with those they serve.

According to Olitzky, if either answer was no, then there's work to be done. “Not that you *need* an app, but you need a deeper way to connect,” he said. “We need to be running in their direction and meeting people where they are and developing our leadership to do so.”

Continued Olitzky: “Leadership is not just about being helpful – it's about continuity, relevance and growth. Conti-

nity for you, relevance for them and growth for all of us.”

Olitzky said that some of his colleagues are no longer officiating weddings. If you don't already have family members officiating funerals, he cautioned that you will within the next five years. “Yes, there are aspects of our country that are moving more conservative religiously,” he said. “But the middle is what's growing and has been growing for decades. We have to understand where that growth is and what role we play.”

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So, which leadership qualities will prevail in the changing environment of funeral service? Topping the list are empathy and compassion. “Everyone in this room can identify with at least one of those traits, but this is what you need to not only shine but succeed and build forward,” he said.

His mantra in life is, “Always be helping, not always be closing.” Said Olitzky: “When you're meeting with the family, it's not about trying to upsell the vault nor is it about trying to push maintenance care and perpetual care. When you're meeting with the family, you are making sure that you have a box of Kleenex in your room. When you're meeting with the family, you're hoping to be going to their home.”

Continued Olitzky: “It's about meeting people where they are and sharing those personal stories. I don't think I ever got through a eulogy personally without crying. In the mortuary science space and in the association space, it used to be, ‘Don't cry. Don't show the emotions. You need to be there and be strong for them.’ The opposite is true now. But it also means [you] have to be resilient because you and I both know that you might not have a funeral for three weeks and then you might have 11 the following week.”

Again, Olitzky emphasized that this work is not about balancing a budget. It's about developing leaders who can shine for someone during their darkest moments.

It also requires thinking strategically. Olitzky often talks about Muhammad Ali. “His *goal* was to win; his *strategy* was to tire out his opponent,” he said. “Most of us confuse tactic or strategy, and we don't know our goal.”

Olitzky brought up green burial and natural organic reduction but was quick to point out that those aren't strategies – they're tactics.

“What is your strategy, and what are you thinking about with your leadership to engage in that strategic thinking?” he asked. “How are you conveying messages? How often are you all working as a team to understand what you should be saying and how you say it?”

Other keys to leadership are integrity and ethics. Olitzky shared a story about a funeral he officiated where the cem-

every staff opened the wrong plot. The error was entirely the family's fault because they had identified the wrong plot. However, the superintendent of the cemetery and the funeral director immediately apologized to the family for the error. "The family was wrong, but, in the moment, they were right," he said. "It wasn't about the tactic of saying, 'I'm winning this.' It was a strategy of service and servant leadership."

Having worked in so many different spaces and industries, Olitzky has observed a lot of similarities when it comes to what constitutes leadership. "Sometimes we see that leadership just happens," he said. "Someone leaves, and you cover that by asking which of your staff is really good at social media. So, now they are in charge of marketing. This is leadership with no plan."

Many multigenerational organizations have been predicated on an overreliance on one leader. "A single leader leads to an unsustainable model, no matter how you cut it," he said. "I'm not talking about hierarchy. I'm talking about who understands and knows the organization and who maintains the institutional memory."

**"Leadership is not just about being helpful – it's about continuity, relevance and growth. Continuity for you, relevance for them and growth for all of us."**

Most importantly, there's a lack of layered mentorship. He said this is not a conversation among generations today. "We can talk about intergenerational and cross-generational workforce," Olitzky said. "A layered mentorship structure means that everyone in your organization is mentoring someone else, and everyone who is new is mentoring up, as well. There are always skills, traits and understanding to be passed along."

He likened this to what is offered by the NFDA National Emerging Leaders Program. "It's not only a focus on future skill needs but also a focus on the future," he said. "If you are trying to have one foot in tradition and one foot in innovation, who's responsible in your organization for both at the same time?"

## WHO ARE THE LEADERS?

To identify leaders, Olitzky suggested looking around your organization and taking note of those who show initiative. Maybe they're doing it for a promotion or raise, or maybe they're doing it just to get a pat on the back. Maybe this is their family, this is their home, and this is where they want to be.

Also, consider who is asking the "why" and "how" questions rather than the "what" questions. "Don't push back when someone asks, 'Why don't we do it that way?'" he said. "They're really digging in to understand, 'Should we be doing it this way?' I can't tell you how many organizations I work

with where we've talked about status-quo bias. 'The only reason we do something the way we do it is because that is the way we've done it.'"

Who is the person on your staff who lifts up others? Olitzky doesn't mean the team cheerleader; he means the person who looks and understands.

Lastly, ask yourself who takes and embraces feedback. "Who understands, 'You're telling me not what I did wrong but how I could do better?'" he prompted. "If you ask me, this is an area that I've always had to work on. When someone gives me constructive feedback, my reflex is defensive. And ... it's maybe three conversations later that I finally begin to process how to make a change and how to do something different."

Mentorship is part of the foundation. It should be more about bridging the gap than coaching. "It's relationship-based growth," he said. "It's letting the person you mentor set the agenda instead of you saying, 'This is what I want to teach you.' It's helping the person who's in your organization understand that the future is bright because of their image, not because you're walking them through it."

Mentorship is asking, "At what part of the job do you think you need to improve?" It's these real conversations that help people be and do better. Being able to relate to someone's struggles brings the conversation to a level playing field. "Let me show you where I failed," he said. "And if the mentorship is there, then the skills transfer. The tactics are real. Can I teach someone how to public-speak? Sure. Not without watching them six times. Not without interjecting and working and helping them get there."

He made it a point to say that mentorship is not just training for the next generation of leadership. Said Olitzky: "Mentorship is, 'We're working on the organization's next chapter. How can we walk into that sunshine together?'"

To mentor effectively, you have to be present. When businesses conduct virtual meetings, they often are fraught with distractions. But if you meet in person, phones, for example, are put away.

"Mentorship is about having the eyeball-to-eyeball conversation, and it's also understanding that you're focusing on *their* goals," he said. "It's asking questions: 'What do you want to do? How can you do it differently? What would you do differently?' Let them give the answer before you do. Help them understand that this is about critical thinking. Agree on the goal of the winning, but don't jump to the tactic. Work on the strategy together."

Communicate that failure is OK. This is another opportunity to share mistakes that you've made. Get to a point of vulnerability. "You are the best when they see your true self," he said. "You're not the best when they see your best. And if you can build trust, lessons from mistakes are far more powerful than the wins."

Set a clear expectation that allows for experimentation by the individual or group. "Let me tell you what I'm hoping for, and let me understand what you think success is, and let me tell you what I think success is," Olitzky offered.

Celebrate growth. Olitzky recommended doing so through regular positive feedback. Acknowledge the progress. “I just want to let you know, I’ve noticed you making an effort to look the families in the eye when you talk to them,” he said as an example.

And when all is said and done, create space for recognition and reflection. “You want to get to a point where you celebrate the small leadership moments,” he said. “You want to get to a point where you’re failing forward. You want to get to a point where you can embed leadership and onboarding into everything you do.”

### MOVING FORWARD

Everyone has to lead. Ask yourself whether you play a large or small leadership role. Said Olitzky: “It’s not about titles. It’s about, ‘What are our strengths, and how do we bring them to the table?’”

Smaller funeral homes might have one, two, five staff members. Olitzky’s advice is to cross-train everyone. He likened this approach to that of the U.S. Navy, which he experienced firsthand. As part of his service, Olitzky went through basic training and learned several things – firefighting, damage control and triage in the context of medical care. “There is no single point of failure,” he said. “If everyone knows everything or can step into the fold, then you have an opportunity.”

Specialization, Olitzky said, is about heightening skill, whereas cross-training is about heightening discipline and awareness.

**“If you can build trust, lessons from mistakes are far more powerful than the wins.”**

“First, you cross-train, then you get to a place where you figure out the family-business continuity plans,” he said. At this point, you document where you’re going and what you’re doing.

“The window of time is not five years; the window of time is not 10 years. The window of time is yesterday,” he added.

Olitzky encouraged attendees to identify one emerging leader that coming month and schedule one mentoring conversation the following quarter. He emphasized that the meeting could be simple and straightforward: “‘Ask me anything. What questions have you been afraid to ask?’”

In addition, Olitzky suggested reviewing or creating your succession plan by the end of the year. “Succession plans aren’t permanent; they’re present,” he said. “You might update it every month.”

Lastly, celebrate one leadership success story publicly. This celebration could be a story in your newsletter, a post on Instagram or an op-ed in the local paper.

Concluded Olitzky: “What’s your legacy? What are you leaving behind to the leaders you’re building? My mission in life is to leave the world in a better place than I found it in.”

*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*



## The Power of Presence

**In all contexts, in every sense, presence is paramount.**

**By Jay Jacobson, Licensed Funeral Director**

**L**eadership is always teaching. The question should not be whether people are learning from you but rather what they are learning.

I remember standing in the prep room with a young intern. His hands were tucked into his lab coat, and his eyes scanned my every move. I explained each step as I worked, but he later told me, “What struck me most was how calm you stayed

when something didn’t go as planned.”

He was not memorizing procedure. He was observing my presence. He was learning not only technique but also how to remain steady in moments of pressure. And that is what stayed with him.

I know this to be true because I once stood in his shoes. I still remember one of the first funeral directors under whom I worked walking me through the smallest of details: how to wash cars until they gleam,

how to line up chairs straight, how to keep a yard manicured and hedges neat. At the time, these tasks felt like chores. But he instilled in me a sentiment that resonates even today: “We do this every day; families only bury their loved one once.” That perspective shaped me. It taught me that presence is not only important in the arrangement room or preparation area; it is crucial in every corner of our work.

Your staff, especially interns and new directors, are always watching. They notice how you respond to a grieving family member's hesitation. They study your body language when you lean in to listen. They recognize when you invite them into the room or leave them outside of it. Every funeral home is a classroom. Every moment is a lesson.

Presence is the heart of what they are learning. Presence in our work and our lives outside of it. Presence in the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Presence at work always has been central to funeral service. For generations, we learned by sweeping floors, setting chairs and watching quietly from the back of the room. At its best, this approach fosters humility and respect for the work. At its worst, it amounts to endless chores with little explanation.

Too often, apprentices and staff are handed tasks without being told why they matter. They vacuum the chapel, but no one explains the sacredness of the space. They wash the hearse, but no one frames it as an act of honor. They make the phone call, but no one connects it to the peace that it offers a family in turmoil.

This is not neglect. It is the result of busy schedules, understaffing and the urgent pressing against the important. But the effect is the same. Apprentices and staff lose sight of meaning. Young directors grow discouraged. The profession risks losing its future leaders.

I encountered another funeral director who rarely lectured but always modeled. He never raised his voice, never rushed a family, never skipped over the minutiae. One day, I asked him why he spent so much time arranging flowers before visitations. He smiled and said, "Because someone will notice. And if even one family member feels cared for in that moment, it was worth the time." I have never forgotten that. It showed me that presence is often conveyed in the details some might overlook.

Not long after that, I worked under another funeral director who taught presence in a different way. His lesson did not pertain to flowers or timing; it was about awareness. He reminded his staff that they should always position themselves so eye contact with the director in charge is possible. It was more than posture; it was attentiveness.

We learned to read each other without speaking. A glance, a gesture, even the smallest shift could communicate what was needed. That discipline trained us to be fully alert, to anticipate, to pivot. It was presence expressed through awareness, and it carried into every part of our service.

These funeral directors taught me that presence is not one-dimensional. Sometimes, it is expressed through the meticulous arrangement of flowers and, other times, through silent coordination among colleagues. Both examples remind us that presence is less about what we say and more about how we carry ourselves.

The solution is not to eliminate tradition. The long hours, the overnight removals and the reverent preparation of a body are experiences that shape character. The answer is to renew tradition with intention, connecting each task to the purpose it serves.

## PRESENCE AS PART OF THE CALLING

Presence in our work means that every detail, no matter how small, is explained and framed as part of the larger calling. Teams closely watch how leaders carry themselves in times of transition. Staff pay attention to whether standards are upheld or compromised, whether leaders listen or impose, whether calm steadiness or hurried shortcuts define each day. Every interaction teaches. In those moments, the lesson staff need most is how to stay grounded.

Owners and managers carry the responsibility of setting the tone of what staff see, feel and learn each day. If a leader rushes through arrangements, cuts corners on preparation or treats community obligations as interruptions, the lesson is clear. Apprentices and staff will assume that efficiency matters more than care and that image matters more than substance.

But when leaders invite participation and take the time to explain the meaning behind tasks, they create a culture where presence is valued. A director who pulls an intern aside to say, "Watch how this family leans on one another," is teaching situational awareness, something no textbook can do. Similarly, to encourage reflection and growth, a director might ask, "What did you see in that service?"

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Funeral homes that thrive are not just service providers. They are training grounds. They are places where presence is both demonstrated and expected. When owners hold themselves accountable, they encourage their staff to do the same. Over time, that culture becomes the reputation of the firm. Families can sense when presence is more than a word in a mission statement. They feel it in the way they are served.

Also, there are moments in history that define what presence truly is. One such moment followed the United Airlines Flight 232 disaster in Sioux City, Iowa. Funeral directors were called onto a scene of unimaginable loss. There was no time for preparation, no opportunity for rehearsal. Yet they showed up with steadiness and dignity.

It has been 36 years since the tragedy, yet its lessons echo through today's Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORTs). What was required of funeral directors in that moment went beyond technical skill. It involved situational awareness, detail orientation, anticipation of needs and quiet coordination. Those directors set a lasting standard.

These lessons transcend time and geography. They remind us that presence is not simply "being there"; presence is bringing calm into chaos and dignity into tragedy. DMORT members who respond to natural disasters, mass fatalities and national crises carry forward the same principles that were lived

out in Sioux City: composure under pressure and respect for every life.

This story is about presence not only at work but also in the community. Families in Sioux City saw firsthand that funeral directors are more than professionals working quietly in the background. They are neighbors, servants and leaders. And the greater community – the nation that watched the story unfold – saw a profession defined by not only its technical capacity but also its humanity.

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For apprentices and staff, including young directors, the takeaway is clear. Presence is not confined to the funeral home. Presence means standing with your town during a festival, sitting with a classroom of students, walking into the aftermath of a disaster. Presence in the ordinary prepares you for presence in the extraordinary. And when you are present in both, you model leadership that transcends generations.

A seasoned funeral director once pulled me aside after a community meeting. I was young, eager and ready to get back to work. He said to me, “The families you serve notice if you show up here. Your presence in this town is part of the care you give.” At the time, I did not fully understand. Years later, as I walked in parades, attended chamber luncheons and sat on high school bleachers, I understood.

I think of community events where my entire town gathered. What struck me was not the spectacle of the parades or festivities but rather the way people noticed who was there. Presence in community is not about standing *out*; it’s about standing *with*. It is about being part of something bigger than yourself, about showing families that you are invested in their lives beyond funeral service.

I once was a substitute teacher for a high school class. At first, assuming I was just another temporary figure to ignore, the students tested me. But when I chose to be present, to notice, to ask questions, to affirm their potential, the atmosphere shifted. One student, quiet and overlooked, emerged as a leader that day because he was given the chance. Presence invites participation.

We, as funeral directors, hold a unique role in our communities. We are called upon in moments of grief, but we also build trust in ordinary times. Grief groups, chamber luncheons, civic board meetings, church events — each are an opportunity to model what presence looks like. Apprentices and staff who see funeral directors consistently show up learn that funeral service is about not just serving families but also shaping communities.

There was a season in my career when the weight of trauma left me numb. I found myself physically present but emotion-

ally distant with my family. It took stepping away for a time to relearn presence at home. That season taught me what no textbook could: If you lose presence with your family, you lose the balance that makes every other type of presence possible.

I remember watching another funeral director balance his life at home. I once saw him step away from a late-night meeting to take a call from his daughter. He came back smiling and said, “She just needed to know I was listening.” That stayed with me. It taught me that presence at home is measured not in hours but in attentiveness. Staff who see us honor our families learn that leadership involves protecting what matters most.

I recall an intern who worked with me during a time of national tragedy. That day reshaped us all. He later told me that, as much as he valued the technical lessons, what he remembered most was my insistence that he go home and be with his wife. He said it was the first time he realized that leadership is not just about doing more. Sometimes, it’s about knowing when to stop and honor the people waiting at home.

Staff watch how we live outside the funeral home. If they see us burn out, ignore our families and refuse to rest, they learn that sacrifice without balance is the expectation. But if they see us carve out time for family, honor commitments at home and speak about loved ones with gratitude, they learn a different lesson. They learn that presence is holistic and that true leaders are those who carry responsibility without losing humanity.

## **BUILDING LEGACY THROUGH PRESENCE**

Legacy is not about titles or tenure. It is about shaping the profession through the habits and values we pass on. Too many young directors enter the field prepared for embalming but unprepared for cumulative grief. They know how to complete paperwork but not how to process the ache of meeting a family that has lost a child.

This is where experienced funeral directors leave their mark. A director who admits they still feel heavy after certain cases gives permission for honesty. Another who tells an apprentice that it’s OK to seek support shows that resilience is not about never breaking but rather about returning again and again with integrity. These conversations do more than instruct – they shape the next generation’s understanding of strength.

Presence shapes legacy in simple ways. A director who pauses to straighten one last flower arrangement before leaving the chapel is teaching care. A director who checks in on staff after a difficult week is teaching compassion. These actions are not small; they are formative. Newcomers learn how to last in this work by watching how we carry the weight.

If we want the profession to thrive, we must give the next generation more than technical training. We must show them how to bear the emotional burden with grace. We must remind them that presence is not only what we give to families but also what we offer to one another. That is how legacy is built, and that is how it endures. Presence is not static. It requires constant renewal. It is tied directly to lifelong learning.

I think of a teacher who saw potential in me before I saw it in myself. She modeled presence by giving attention, noticing, calling out what was hidden. This is what experienced funeral directors do. They see more in their apprentices and staff than those individuals see in themselves.

Apprentices and staff need to see funeral directors living as learners. They need to see professionals reading books, pursuing continuing education, embracing new technologies, and speaking openly about what they know and what they are still discovering. When leaders stop learning, staff quietly conclude that growth ends with licensure. When leaders keep learning, staff see that curiosity and development are the very lifeblood of this profession.

Presence is the daily decision to keep your mind engaged, your skills sharp and your curiosity alive. And when your staff see you choosing growth, they learn that growth is not optional. Growth is the way forward.

Every action you take in front of your staff is instruction. Every detail, no matter how ordinary, is shaping the next generation of professionals. They are not only learning how to serve families – they also are learning what kind of leaders they should be. Through every detail, values are absorbed.

Funeral service will not be sustained by nostalgia. It will be sustained by renewal. Renewal begins with the choices we make when no one seems to be watching because the truth is, someone always is.

Presence at work teaches your staff to serve with competence and care. Presence in the community shows your staff to lead with integrity and influence. Presence at home reminds your staff that balance and humanity are not weaknesses but strengths.

This is what it means to lead by legendary example. It is the standard worth striving for, the lesson your staff are already learning and the legacy you will leave behind.

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## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: Legal Facts and Fictions

Exploring the legality of this ever-advancing tech and how it fits into your firm's operations.

By Lauren R. Pettine, Attorney, WRW Legal

**T**raditional computer programs are rules-based and deterministic. For example, when you enter  $2 + 2$  into a calculator, its programming will always generate 4 as the answer. Similarly, if you ask a calculator to divide a number by zero, it will produce an error. A traditional program cannot make determinations beyond its initial programming.

Artificial intelligence programs differ from those with traditional programming because they can “learn” and make decisions beyond their initial programming. Artificial intelligence (AI) is a broad catchall term used to describe any programming that allows a computer to make decisions and generate content via algorithms without human interference.

Artificial intelligence is not defined by the goal or output of the program – it's defined by its approach to a problem. Artificial intelligence encompasses:

- **Computer vision:** These systems can recognize and interpret images and videos. Examples are the programs in self-driving cars and those that analyze medical imaging.

- **Predictive modeling:** These systems can be used to predict what will occur based on data inputs. Examples are programs that predict which consumers are likeliest to purchase a product or programs that recommend products an individual might purchase based on similar consumer decisions.
- **Natural language processing:** These programs are built to mimic or interpret human language. Examples are programs that power chatbots, voice recognition or language translation.

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- **Generative artificial intelligence:** These programs create an output from a large dataset and user prompt. Examples are image generators such as DALL-E or text generators such as ChatGPT.

All forms of artificial intelligence are created in essentially the same way. First, the program is given a vast quantity of data. Depending on the type of artificial intelligence, that data can include text, images, voice recordings and consumer profiles. AI companies are often opaque about just how much data they use to develop a program; however, the first dataset used for the development of an AI program can range from 550 gigabytes (GB) to 45 terabytes (TB) of data.

For context, 550 GB of data amounts to about 372 million pages of text or roughly 850,000 images. And 45 TB of data is approximately 30 billion pages of text or nearly 700 million images. In total, the Library of Congress has approximately 74 TB of information available on the internet.

Once an AI program has been trained on that first dataset, it is then fine-tuned with a second, smaller dataset. For instance, the first dataset might teach a large language model how to “speak” English, then the second dataset will fine-tune it to speak like a customer service representative, specifically.

Because artificial intelligence is a process, not an output, AI programs can be trained to do a number of things relevant to the deathcare profession:

- Automatically create obituaries from input consumer data
- Prepare digital marketing materials, including images and text
- Replace a customer service agent with either a chatbot or virtual voice assistant for phone calls
- Analyze consumer data for marketing or lead-generation purposes
- Create music to play during funeral livestreams

In the context of funeral service, it has been suggested that AI will save costs on customer service agents and licensing for marketing and streaming materials, but as the technology continues to improve, there will likely be more use cases.

**Any company that uses AI should have a review process in place to ensure any potential for bias or discrimination is mitigated.**

## LEGAL ISSUES

Artificial intelligence is a new technology, so it has not yet been fully tested – technologically or legally. Prior to using artificial intelligence, you should be aware of potential liability issues and limitations.

## 1. ACCURACY

**FICTION: Computers cannot lie, and if the computer does lie, the company is not responsible for it.**

**FACT: Artificial intelligence can “hallucinate” or, effectively, lie.** For artificial intelligence that generates text, this means that the program is capable of saying explicitly untrue things. Take the strawberry problem. For a while, when you asked ChatGPT how many R’s are in the word “strawberry,” it would confidently tell you that there are only two. This is because AI programs function differently than the human brain. AI programs transform text into numbers, then predict what “number” should come next. So, ChatGPT was unable to register the word “strawberry” the way the human brain would, therefore the program couldn’t count the letters accurately.

**FACT: A company that uses or develops artificial intelligence is responsible for it, regardless of its accuracy.** Air Canada’s AI chatbot gave incorrect information about fare pricing to a consumer, and the court required Air Canada honor the prices that the chatbot provided. A consumer persuaded an AI chatbot on Chevrolet’s website to sell him a 2024 Chevrolet Tahoe for \$1. A man is suing OpenAI in Norway because ChatGPT said that the man had killed his two sons and was in prison for 21 years.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has issued guidance that companies are responsible for the actions of their chatbots and must take precautions to prevent hallucinations or errors.

If you implement a chatbot, voice assistant or artificial intelligence program with which consumers directly interact, your company may be responsible for the deals that it makes. Consider what would happen if an FTC enforcement agent asked your AI assistant for the price of embalming. Would your AI tool give the right price, or would it give a range of prices based on the data with which it was programmed? What if a consumer told your AI agent that the quoted price was too expensive and they wanted a lower one?

AI programmers are working diligently to create technological safeguards that will limit the number of hallucinations and errors artificial intelligence makes. However, the technology is simply not advanced enough to prevent all errors, and providing the wrong pricing information to a consumer over the phone is a violation of the FTC Funeral Rule, which carries a fine up to \$53,000.

## 2. DATA PRIVACY

**FICTION: Consumer data fed into an AI program is not subject to data privacy laws.**

**FACT: Consumer data, even that data put into a dataset for an AI program, can be subject to data privacy laws and consumer deletion requests.** More than 20 states have adopted some form of consumer data privacy law that requires the deletion of consumers’ private data. For example, in 2024, New Jersey passed a consumer data privacy law that allows a consumer to obtain a copy of their personal data and request the deletion

of their personal data. It also requires deletion of personal data at the end of the provision of services.

Most AI programs require vast amounts of consumer data to make predictions about which consumers will purchase which products or about which consumers are likely to make purchases at all. Usually, consumer data is added to artificial intelligence as part of the fine-tuning process, but consumer data can make its way into initial datasets, as well. This presents a problem because that data cannot be removed from the dataset without retraining the entire program.

There are currently no active cases regarding the inclusion of data in an AI program as a violation of consumer privacy laws. However, LinkedIn was sued by consumers for disclosing their private messages to a third party without permission, and Amazon was sued by the FTC for the indefinite retention of consumers' and children's voice recordings.

In the next few years, we anticipate that we will see litigation over whether consumer data is transformed and therefore allowed to be retained as part of an AI program or whether consumer data needs to be removed from an AI program upon consumer request for deletion.

### 3. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

**FICTION: If data is on the internet, it's free for any use.**

**FACT: Data on the internet may still be protected by intellectual property law, and we are seeing this dispute hit the courts.**

In June, Disney and Universal sued AI firm Midjourney for copyright infringement. The lawsuit, which was filed in California, alleges that Midjourney stole copyrighted works to train its AI engine to generate images. To date, many companies have sued AI firms for copyright infringement. *The New York Times* has sued OpenAI and Microsoft; Sony Music Entertainment has sued AI song generator companies Suno and Udio; and Getty Images has sued Stability AI.

Under the fair use doctrine, the use of copyrighted materials is permissible in certain contexts. The fair use doctrine allows limited use of intellectual property without the owner's permission for things like criticism, reporting, teaching or research. This is determined on a case-by-case basis by courts.

Currently, no court has ruled whether AI datasets are protected under the fair use doctrine. Because many AI programs are monetized, it is possible courts will rule that using copyrighted materials to train artificial intelligence is impermissible and that all AI companies need permission from intellectual property owners to use their materials in datasets. This ruling would hamper the AI industry.

Courts also could rule that the outputs – derived from the original intellectual property – are owned by the intellectual property holder, not the AI company.

Until courts start issuing rulings, we do not know how the law will be applied to this novel technology, and this can produce liability for companies that use AI-generated content.

### 4. BIAS/DISCRIMINATION

**FICTION: Artificial intelligence is incapable of bias or discrimination.**

**Fact: Any biases present in the dataset on which an artificial intelligence was trained can be repeated by the program.** This is a concern especially with customer-facing AI programs, such as chatbots, voice assistants and hiring assistants. AI bias occurs when the program produces prejudiced results due to historical inequalities that were embedded in the data.

This means that an AI chatbot could potentially violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Equal Credit Opportunity Act or Fair Housing Act when interacting with consumers. This is also a concern within the hiring context.

**Funeral service remains a profession that requires a licensed human being participate in the arrangement process.**

The FTC has explicitly stated that companies must take all reasonable precautions before an AI program hits the market. Disclosures about potential biases are not enough to protect a company from discriminatory AI. Therefore, any company that uses AI should have a review process in place to ensure any potential for bias or discrimination is mitigated.

### 5. LICENSURE TO SELL

**FICTION: AI assistants can perform tasks that require licensure, such as those related to law or funeral service.**

**FACT: Licensed professionals must take responsibility for AI assistants helping with tasks that require licensure.** There has been much discussion about using chatbots or AI assistants to help firms sell funerals without the involvement of a funeral director. However, funeral service remains a profession that requires a licensed human being participate in the arrangement process. Therefore, all AI use should be limited to tasks that an unlicensed administrative staff member could legally perform. State regulators likely will issue guidance on the use of AI working with consumers in the future.

### BEST PRACTICES

Artificial intelligence is a tool that can be used to make the funeral profession better. It is helpful for, say, performing administrative tasks or assisting with note-taking during arrangement conferences. However, because this is such a new technology, artificial intelligence should be used judiciously. The best practices for now are:

- **Be human.** Give consumers the power to talk to a person when a chatbot is involved. Establish a process that involves a human being confirming your AI program or chatbot is providing correct, nondiscriminatory and noninfringing content. AI assistants should not be able to make contracts unless a human being is involved.
- **Disclose.** Companies that use AI programs should

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disclose to consumers what information is shared and what companies will have access to that information. If you use an AI program, you should tell consumers in the terms of service on your website and via disclaimers and disclosures.

- **Inform.** Consumers must be informed that they are talking to an AI chatbot. California law and FTC guidance explicitly require notification that consumers are interacting with an AI chatbot.
- **Audit.** Companies should have a process to periodically audit AI for accuracy and bias. Although there is not yet guidance on what this audit procedure should look like, we recommend you have a written operating procedure that outlines a timeline and process for review, as well as measures to correct any AI errors. In addition, you should ensure your AI pricing information is accurate.

- **Confirm.** Companies that use artificial intelligence should confirm with their AI provider that its AI dataset is in compliance with intellectual property laws and consumer data privacy laws.
- **Verify.** We recommend companies verify that fine-tuned datasets do not include consumer data that should have been deleted pursuant to state law or consumer deletion requests.

Ultimately, artificial intelligence is a tool. It can be used as an assistant to bolster productivity, and there are safe ways to use it. Until the law is more settled, use artificial intelligence cautiously.

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## Cremation Is Here to Stay. Are You?

The rise in cremation doesn't need to mean a decline in funerals.

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Founder and Director, Center for Loss and Life Transition

**T**he 2025 NFDA *Cremation and Burial Report* noted that the cremation rate in the United States is expected to increase from 63.4% in 2025 to 82.3% in 2045. The number of cremations will be double that of burials in 2025. The overall number of deaths nationwide is projected to increase continually through 2045. The annual number of deaths in 2045 is projected to be 26% higher than it was in 2023. Despite these changing death rates, burial rates will continue to fall and cremation rates will continue to climb throughout the next 25 years.

According to the report, many factors contribute to the increasingly frequent selection of cremation by U.S. consumers. These factors include cost considerations, environmental concerns, increasingly transient populations, fewer religious prohibitions of the practice, and changing consumer preferences, such as the desire for less-ritualized funeral ceremonies.

In addition, cremation is becoming more socially acceptable as more Americans think and talk about death in new ways. Cremation will only continue to gain acceptance go-

ing forward because an increasing number of consumers will have had relatives and/or friends who opted for it.

Obviously, cremation is here to stay. The questions is: Can your funeral home strategically respond to this reality?

### **Cremation and the Six Needs of Mourning**

This article explores the ways in which meaningful funeral ceremonies that include cremation help bereaved individuals meet their mourning needs. The hope is that, ultimately, they can integrate their grief and find continued meaning in life and living.

Because cremation is increasingly a given, it is more essential than ever that funeral home staff educate families about the purposes of funerals and help create ceremonies that set the bereaved individuals on a path to healthy mourning. Cremation is simply a form of disposition, and families need help understanding that funerals are essential rites of passage, regardless of the means of disposition.

#### **Mourning Need #1: Acknowledge the reality of the death.**

When someone dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality – and finality – of the death. Typically, we embrace this reality in two phases. First, we acknowledge the death with our minds. We are told that someone has died, and we understand the fact of the death, at least intellectually. Next, throughout the following days and weeks, with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

You have the opportunity to help families that choose cremation understand the importance of confronting the reality of the death. Encourage them to spend time with the body before cremation. Offer them the option of a public or private viewing of the body, as well as a full ceremony followed by cremation. In the funeral process, sequence is important, and the last thing we generally do is dispose of the body. (Of course, be sensitive to cultural differences regarding the meaning and appropriateness of viewing the body.)

In addition, offer to have family members accompany the body to the crematory. Many people do not associate cremation with a funeral that has a viewing, but every day is an opportunity to change that. Ask yourself: “Can I, with sensitivity, articulate to families the value of a visitation?”

#### **Mourning Need #2: Move toward the pain of the loss.**

Healthy grief involves expressing our painful thoughts and feelings, and healthy funeral ceremonies allow us to do just that. People tend to cry – even sob and wail – at funerals be-

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cause funerals force us to concentrate on the fact of the death and our often excruciatingly painful feelings surrounding that death.

To their credit, funerals provide us with an accepted venue for our painful feelings. They are perhaps the only time and place where we, as a society, condone such openly outward expressions of our sadness.

With compassionate education, you can discourage families that choose cremation from skipping a funeral ceremony altogether, which many are wont to do. Explain the importance of having some type of ceremony, particularly one that allows them to confront their pain.

**Whether they realize it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, “Don’t come support me.”**

Fortunately, meaningful rituals can hold contradictions. Thus, it’s OK to celebrate life while also embracing sadness. The capacity to experience a wide range of emotions, including sadness, is more accessible when the guest of honor is present. Some families need help understanding that a major purpose of funerals is to allow for sadness.

#### **Mourning Need #3: Remember the person who died.**

To integrate grief into our lives, we must shift our relationship with the person who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. A meaningful funeral encourages us to begin this shift because it provides a natural time and place to think about the moments we shared – good and bad – with the person who died. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral invites us to focus on our relationship with that specific individual and share those memories with others.

At a meaningful funeral, the eulogy (or remembrance) highlights the major events in the life of the person who died and the characteristics they most prominently displayed. At the visitation and the reception that follows the ceremony, many mourners informally share memories of the person who died. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able to tell the “story” of the death itself and our memories of the person who died, the more likely we are to integrate our grief.

In addition to incorporating opportunities for remembrance into the ceremony, you can help families that choose cremation commemorate the person who died by encouraging them to create a permanent memorial. Unfortunately, many families don’t realize they can get a niche in a columbarium or hold a traditional burial for the cremated remains. Often, families need to be educated about these options.

And if the family chooses to perform a scattering, they still need guidance on their options for a permanent memorial.

There are various creative ways to help families meet this mourning need, and the more that are integrated into a funeral or memorial ceremony, the better.

**Mourning Need #4: Develop a new self-identity.**

We are all social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Alan Wolfelt; I am also a son, brother, husband, father and friend. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity – as defined in that way – changes.

The funeral helps us begin the difficult process of developing a new self-identity. It provides a venue for public acknowledgment of our amended roles. If you are a parent and your child dies, the funeral marks the beginning of your life as a “former” parent – in the physical sense. (You will always have that relationship through memory.) Others attending the funeral are, in effect, saying, “We acknowledge your changed identity, and we want you to know we still care about you.”

On the other hand, in situations where there is no funeral (most commonly in conjunction with cremation), the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed, so that person is often at higher risk of being socially abandoned.

**Mourning Need #5: Search for meaning.**

When a loved one dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? What happens after death?

We must explore these types of questions if we are to reconcile our grief. The funeral provides us with such an opportunity. For those who adhere to a specific religious faith, a meaningful funeral might reinforce that faith and provide comfort. Alternately, it might prompt us to question our faith or worldview.

Funerals are a way for us, as individuals and as a community, to convey our values and beliefs about life and death. The very existence of funerals demonstrates that death is important to us. For the living to go on living as fully and healthily as possible, this is as it should be.

**Mourning Need #6: Receive ongoing support from others.**

Funerals are a means of publicly expressing our beliefs and feelings about the death of someone loved. In fact, funerals are a public venue for offering and receiving grief support, both at the time of the ceremony and into the future. Funerals make a social statement that says, “Come support me.” Whether they realize it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, “Don’t come support me.”

Funerals also let us demonstrate our support physically. At meaningful funerals, we are encouraged to embrace, touch and comfort one another. This physical show of support is one of the most healing aspects of a meaningful funeral ceremony.

Another is the establishment of helping relationships. Friends often seek ways to help the primary mourners: “May I bring the flowers back to your house?” or “Would you like someone to watch little Susie for a few afternoons this week?”

Friends helping friends – and strengthened relationships among the living – are additional benefits of a meaningful funeral.

Finally, and most simply, a funeral serves as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or their family members, we attend the funeral if possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. By attending the funeral, we let everyone there know that they are not alone in their grief.

**Most everyone who cares about a person who died or their family will feel a natural impulse to gather ... Cremation does not change this essential truth.**

Today’s families need you to educate them about the social-support function of funerals, regardless of the means of disposition. Please help them understand that not only do they need and deserve the support of others but also those others need and deserve support, too. Most everyone who cares about a person who died or their family will feel a natural impulse to gather. They need a time and place to get together. Cremation does not change this essential truth.

When someone dies, if we are to fully love and live again, we must mourn. Yet, when the need to mourn is greatest, some people are inclined to run from it.

Please don’t let the families that choose cremation as a means of disposition run from their painful yet necessary encounter with grief. The body of the person who died is essential to this encounter, and spending time in the body’s presence helps activate all six of the aforementioned mourning needs. Cremation is not the problem; cremating immediately or prematurely is.

Your role is to offer information and choices. I challenge you to consider these mourning needs each time you sit down with a family to plan a funeral.

I hope you will be among the gatekeepers of the funeral, who ensure that meaningful funerals are here to stay, even though cremation has become a popular choice for many. Let’s dedicate ourselves to educating families in a way that promises full, element-rich, personalized funerals continue now and forevermore.

*Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. He speaks on grief-related topics, offers training sessions for caregivers, and has written many resources and bestselling books on grief for both caregivers and the grieving. For more information, visit [CenterForLoss.com](http://CenterForLoss.com) or email [drwolfelt@CenterForLoss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@CenterForLoss.com).*

# Employees and Social Media

## What can employers act upon when staff post personal opinions on social media?

Contributed by SESCO Management Consultants

**A**s more people use social media to communicate, employers must know what is permissible when it comes to disciplining, or even terminating, employees for their online activity. The public sharing of opinions on hot-button topics has caused employers to ponder where the “line” is. How can – and should – employers respond to protect the good name and reputation of their companies?

In general, when employees post, comment or otherwise engage on social media, employers may act on this conduct as though it occurred in the workplace.

Several protections could apply to an employee facing discipline for their social media activity, though. These include the legal prohibition of harassment and violence, the legal protection of whistleblowers, and the permissibility of complaints about workplace conditions.

### LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Private-sector and most nonprofit employers are not bound by the First Amendment’s free speech protections, which only restrict government action.

Several states – including California, Colorado and New York – have statutes protecting employees from retaliation for lawful off-duty conduct. In addition, Connecticut, Louisiana, Minnesota, South Carolina and Wyoming specifically protect off-duty political activity. These laws prevent employers from firing or disciplining employees for expressing personal views, unless those views have a clear material impact on the business.

Even in places without a directed state law, the federal National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) provides employees with protection. If the social media use relates, even indirectly, to the employee’s terms and conditions of employment, it potentially qualifies as protected “concerted activity.”

This is especially true if a post touches upon workplace concerns shared by co-workers (e.g., wages, benefits, and working conditions, as defined by the NLRA).

### SESCO’S GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES

The following comprise what *not* to include in your company’s social media policy:

- **Prohibitions on work-related discussions.** Employees have a legal right to discuss jobs, wages, working conditions and other employment issues.
- **Restrictions on social connections.** Avoid language that bars employees from “friending” or connecting with co-workers online.

- **Requests for private social media credentials.** Do not require employees to share their account passwords.

- **Bans on pay or benefits discussions.** Preventing these conversations may violate labor laws.

- **Prohibitions on media contact.** Although employees have the right to speak to the media, you may require they specify that they’re speaking as individuals, not company representatives.

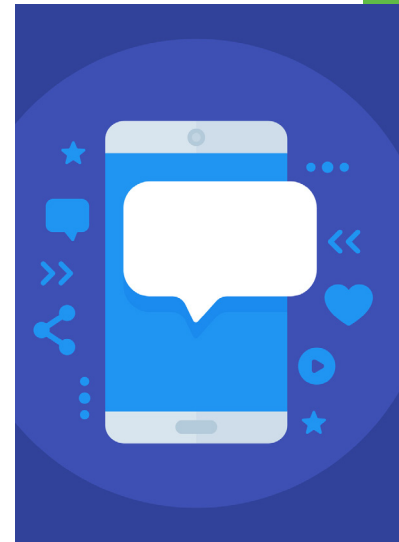
Employers should provide clear, practical rules for online behavior. Your policies should do or request the following:

- **Cite clear examples of unacceptable behavior.** Specify that hate speech, discrimination, bullying, retaliation, threats of violence and condoning acts of violence on social media will not be tolerated and might result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

**In general, when employees post, comment or otherwise engage on social media, employers may act on this conduct as though it occurred in the workplace.**

- **Respect company values.** Encourage employees to align their online conduct with the values of the company. Make sure the company’s values are known to them.
- **Update privacy settings.** Employees should regularly review and update their social media privacy settings.
- **Do not share internal information.** Prohibit posting confidential business information, financial details and sensitive customer data.
- **Think before you post.** Remind employees that posts can have personal and professional consequences.
- **Comply with specific state laws.**

*SESCO Management Consultants is an NFDA Endorsed Provider that offers free or discounted access to a wide variety of HR-related information and services.*



*From the Editor's Desk*

## Did AI Gaslight Brewers Fans?

**I**n our continuing reports on artificial intelligence (AI) in both this publication and *The Director*, we include notes of caution about becoming too reliant on AI. The rapid development of AI brings numerous benefits, but it also introduces significant risks and ethical concerns of which you should be aware.

One evening during the MLB playoffs, for instance, an NFDA staff member was watching the Milwaukee Brewers play the Los Angeles Dodgers in Game 1 of the National League Championship Series. Because she had been in and out of the room, she wanted to know how many pitchers the Brewers had gone through while she was away, so she asked AI.

Here is the answer she received: "AI Overview. The Brewers did not play a game tonight, October 13, 2025. The team was eliminated from the postseason by the Cubs in a playoff game on October 10, 2025, and their 2025 season has concluded. Therefore, no pitchers were used tonight."

Was AI gaslighting Brewers fans? This is a good reminder that AI isn't always right. Also, asking AI about an event in progress might not yield the most accurate results. In this case, however, AI said the Brewers had lost a series that they, in fact, had won. This aspect wasn't real time – it had happened days before.

Bottom line: *Fact-check everything*. The best advice I have received regarding AI is similar to what I learned in my journalism classes. Always cross-reference core facts, figures, names, dates and statistics with multiple independent and authoritative human-created sources. Basically, treat the AI's output as if it's an unverified claim.

You can ask AI to show its work by using a technique such as "Chain-of-Thought" prompting. For example, you could say, "Explain your reasoning step-by-step before providing the final answer." This helps expose unsupported assumptions and flaws in logic.

Also, you can ask AI to cite its sources with direct links and references. You might have seen this in your Google searches.

Although AI is a great tool, being completely reliant on it unchecked will become problematic.

*Ed* - Edward J. Defort  
- Editor

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