

Cremation and Applied Leadership: An Unexpected Couple

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I had never heard of a degree in Professional Studies-Applied Leadership before I enrolled in this program. I had always expected to get a degree in Business Management or Business Administration. Upon learning about this degree program and the specific area of Applied Leadership, I decided to pursue a degree that, to me, transcended that of a typical business degree. The majority of standard business courses have been required for this program, but the classes specific to this concentration were immediately relatable and applicable. They differentiated this degree program from the others of their kind. Applied Leadership challenges the student to take on a holistic perspective of the professional environment. I was encouraged to look at things differently, to be creative, to listen to those around me, and experience learning as a life changing event. This program has taught me to apply the knowledge and skills I have learned to positively influence others. This approach is relevant in any area of business.

This new found freedom has led me to some interesting places, like the subject of this essay. As a member of the financial industry for nearly two decades, I would have never expected to be writing an essay on cremation and actually finding application in my current career. Nonetheless, here we are. Based on my Focus 2 assessments, I am highly suited for the position of Funeral Director. Upon learning this, I immediately contacted an actual Funeral Director that I know and was able to get his perspective on the industry. The current trend for funeral sciences is the continual rise of cremation as a choice over traditional burial. This trend has drastically affected and continues to impact the funeral industry. What are the short and long term implications of the cremation trend as it continues to rise? How does this relate to Applied Leadership?

The National Funeral Directors Association projected the rate of cremation to exceed that of burial by 2015 (National Funeral Directors Association, n.d.). There prediction almost came

true. According to the Cremation Association of North America, the U.S. cremation rate reached 48.6% in 2015, with a projected rate of 54.3% by 2020 (Cremation Association of North America (CANA), n.d.). The cost of cremation is significantly less than of a traditional burial. Cremation replaces the costly expense of a casket and burial plot with exceptionally lower cost of a wooden cremation box and urn for the remaining ashes. In 2008, just before the mortgage bubble burst and the Great Recession began, the national cremation rate was 36.2% (Sanburn, 2013). In a mere seven years, cremation has grown well over 10% and shows no sign of slowing down. While crematoriums are most likely rejoicing at the news of this upward trend, many funeral homes are feeling the negative impact, especially if they do not offer the service.

The primary reasons for the upward trend in cremation services are location, culture, and cost. The traditional, nuclear family is quickly becoming a thing of the past. Many people live a great distance from their family members and may have relocated multiple times throughout their lives. Having a traditional burial service followed by an insertion into a family burial plot is just not practical or desired. “Americans can expect to move an average of 11 times over a lifetime, and many of us may no longer know anyone in the town where we grew up” (Esswien, 2016). With this fact in mind, one must realize the culture is changing. Religious affiliation of any kind has declined. With this shift, traditional funeral services have evolved. Many are opting for alternative memorial services, often connected to the deceased’s choice of ashes distribution. The \$17 billion dollar funeral industry is being forced to reevaluate their strategy. “Funeral directors are starting to see that cremation isn’t going anywhere,” says Mike Nicodemus, NFDA’s Vice President of Cremation Services (Sanburn, 2016). Families are no longer planning elaborate and expensive memorial services, if they are even planning them at all. The Great Recession has forced many Americans to evaluate their spending. This is perhaps the most

significant reason for the rise in cremation rates in the U.S. Considering the average cost of a funeral, not including a burial plot, is \$6500 and the cost of cremation is a mere one third of that, it is no surprise the financially savvy American is choosing the route of cremation (Mathisen, 2013). The environment, the culture, and the economy all factor into consumers' decisions, even in death. The need to deal with death will always exist. Funeral directors must adapt to ensure the longevity of their business.

The ability to adapt correlates to any industry, field, or kind of business. This is precisely why I chose the Applied Leadership concentration for my degree. This is also why the topic of cremation is relevant to even a career banker like me. According to Northouse, "Adaptive Leadership stresses the activities of the leader in relation to the work of the followers in the contexts in which they find themselves" (2016). This is a timely description of the current leadership landscape in the funeral industry, just as it is applicable to the current environment of the financial industry. Applied Leadership, the real life application of leadership principles, theories, and practices, allows one to navigate the daily terrain of business and society. As leaders, we do not exist or function in a vacuum devoid of outside influence. We must adapt to the environment in which we find ourselves. The economy, culture, and resulting trends in our respective industries require us to make critical and calculated decisions to ensure the well-being of our organization. The importance of the proper application of effective leadership exists in all industries, from education to finances to the funeral industry.

Cremation has had a dramatic effect on the funeral industry and will continue to impact the livelihood of funeral directors as long as the trend continues to rise. Statistics have shown that cremation is here to stay and more Americans are finding it to be their preferred option. Effective, timely, and practical leadership techniques and practices will be required to ensure the

future success of any funeral organization. Leadership is equally applicable to the funeral industry and all other industries alike. As I began this essay, I stated I never expected to be writing about cremation. In spite of my unexpected subject matter, the connection simply makes sense. Leadership is universal. It is necessary. It takes hard work and sacrifice. It requires flexibility and adaptation. I do not know what my future holds, nor does anyone. However, I do know that whether I am a funeral director, a musician, a banker, or whatever this life leads me to be, I will draw from and utilize what I have learned over the course of this degree program.

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