

Emotional Intelligence and the funeral profession

By Alison Crake MBA FCMI

The role of the funeral director has changed greatly in recent years. In the 1970s and 80s the majority of funerals were either Catholic or Protestant and the Priest or Vicar dictated the majority of the content of the service. Death was something of a taboo subject and there was certainly no access to the wealth of information regarding funerals that can now be found on the internet.

We now live in a multi-cultural society where people are, to a certain extent, more open about discussing death and bereavement - they expect their funeral director to be aware of differing customs and to offer a wider variety of services. Many funerals are now much more 'personalised' ceremonies, many families choose to have favourite pieces of music played, poetry readings of, perhaps, a eulogy read by a friend of the family.

The wish for more family participation in the funeral service itself increased significantly following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997. A country was united in collective mourning, the public queued to sign books of condolence and floral tributes were placed at Kensington and Buckingham


Palace. Diana's funeral was watched by an estimated 2.5 billion people around the world and her brother Earl Spencer's eulogy was, perhaps, the most moving in modern times. In an article in the *Independent on Sunday* in August 2002, Frank Furedi (Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent and well known commentator on contemporary cultural life) stated that "the mobilisation of the British public through collective mourning has become a powerful force. Individuals are now expected to share in other people's grief".

Although it is highly unlikely that any of us would ever be involved in funeral arrangements of similar proportions to that of the Princess of Wales, her death and the subsequent outpouring of public grief, particularly amongst the younger generation, did impact on our profession. We noticed an increase in the requests for music, readings and personal tributes and, in general, more family participation in the service itself.

When the funeral is something of a high profile event, or even when there is a



request for more family participation in the arrangements and in the service itself, the funeral director becomes, to a certain extent, both counsellor and Master of Ceremonies. This is partly due to the fact that the participation of religious officiants is becoming less popular with consumers, subsequently the role of emotional support for the bereaved - a role traditionally associated with a Minister or Priest - is shifting to others. A report by Mintel in 2007 found that 80% of younger consumers believed that the funeral director should offer counselling services and around half of all older consumers concurred with this. As well as offering emotional support for the bereaved, funeral directors are expected to have emotional support mechanisms in place for those who work alongside them.



All of these things place additional demands on the time of the funeral director and his/her staff and they have had to adapt accordingly. If the funeral is to be carried out to the family's satisfaction these demands must be handled with patience understanding, empathy and meticulous attention to detail. When meeting a bereaved family the funeral director must show empathy and understanding if the family are to place their trust in him/her. The loss of a loved one leaves many families feeling bewildered and vulnerable - they will look to the funeral director for guidance on the difficult aspects of arranging a funeral and place the responsibility for the care of their loved one with them,

As a service industry the funeral profession has some unique attributes. Funeral directors have but one chance to "get it right", to be at the right Church or venue, with the right coffin, at the right time, with the right flowers, etc. In most companies the funeral itself will be the result of a team effort - the funeral director, funeral service operatives, mortuary technician, administration staff, drivers and pall bearers. Each must perform their roles consistently and with excellence in order for the funeral directors to provide the level of service the family expects. Effective leadership is, therefore, of paramount importance. Whilst the funeral director needs to understand and empathise with the emotions of the bereaved, he/she must also take into account the emotions of those that work alongside them.

Emotions play a far greater part in individual success or ability

In 1996, Daniel Goleman created a stir by claiming that existing views on cognitive intelligence or IQ were too narrow and that our emotions played a far greater part in individual success or ability. He stated that self awareness, empathy and social-deftness were the attributes that made people excel. He referred to these abilities as "Emotional Intelligence".

Emotional Intelligence (EI) was not a new concept in 1996. The model of EI had been proposed in 1990 by Yale Psychologists Peter Salovey and John D Mayer who, themselves, were following the intellectual lead of Howard Gardner, a Psychologist at the Harvard School of Education. His 1983 book, *Frames of Mind*, proposed that there were not just one but a wide spectrum of intelligences. Salovey and Mayer expanded on this and mapped out in detail how we can bring intelligence to our emotions. Five characteristics of EI were defined:-

1. Understanding one's emotions
2. Knowing how to manage them
3. Emotional self control
4. Understanding others' emotions, or empathy
5. Managing relationships

How does Emotional Intelligence fit into the funeral profession?

If we look at what we know of the role of any funeral director or, indeed, any funeral service professional and then take note of the characteristics outlined above, we can see that two at least would be of particular importance. Recognising emotions in others (empathy) and understanding ones' own emotions. The ability to recognise and understand the emotions of others would be paramount when meeting families that have been bereaved. The ability to empathise combined with the skill and knowledge to carry out their duties professionally could be seen as a prerequisite for anyone working within the funeral profession. They must also know and understand their own emotions - for example to meet with a family who has lost a young child is difficult, to see a family overwhelmed by grief can have a great impact on any of us. Very often mental associations will be made; the funeral director or anyone on the company's staff may have children or close family of a similar age or, perhaps, children at the same school. A sudden and traumatic insight into the frailty of human life can weigh heavily on the emotions.

For those of us that are in management positions where we have responsibility for the welfare of others we need to have the ability to recognise that these sort of emotions may play a part in the life of the people that we work alongside. Whilst

we should have the ability to recognise and empathise with the emotions of the bereaved and deal with our own emotions where that is concerned, we also need to take into account the feelings of our colleagues and offer support to them also.

Whilst we can see that EI characteristics can play a great part in how we cope in our profession, it would be unfair to say that they alone will make us perform in our roles better. In fairness to Goleman, he does not dismiss the attributes of IQ or cognitive intelligence in terms of our organisational success but states that, whilst technical skill and ability may make us competitive, "the ability to outperform others depends on the relationships of the people involved". The definition of relationships in this context is broad and includes our relationships with customers, colleagues and superiors.

How do we know if we are emotionally intelligent?

Many of you reading this article will view the characteristics attributed to EI as "common sense" and the academics Bardzil and Slaski (2003) would agree with you, describing it as merely an "umbrella term" for "a collection of well established interpersonal skills". For those that have been in the profession for a number of years this could well be the case; the skill in dealing with people's emotions and your own is something that comes with experience. Many of the experienced funeral directors I have spoken to view it as being "instinctive" and say that when walking into a room to meet the bereaved family they will often sense if there is any discord between the family members.

Where EI perhaps would come into its own in the funeral profession is in the recruiting process, as a way of assessing a candidate's ability to handle the emotional side of their working life. In the past EI testing has been criticised as many of the models available relied on self reporting measures. This can often lead to inaccurate outcomes as there is the risk of the candidate "enhancing" their answers when asked to judge their own ability.

The Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT®)

Psychologists Jack Mayer and Peter Salovey are the originators of the theory of Emotional Intelligence. Together with David Caruso they formed a powerful and sophisticated tool which measures a person's actual emotional skills. The Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (the MSCEIT® – pronounced "Mess-keet") is an *ability* model of emotional intelligence. The Mayer-Salovey Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT®) assesses your ability to reason with and about emotional information. This includes recognising emotion, using emotions to think more effectively, understanding emotion, and managing emotion.

The MSCEIT® consists of eight different sections and requires about 45 minutes to complete. The test is completed on line and each section has its own instructions. All of the questions should be answered if possible, if more than 10% of the questions are omitted, the scoring process is invalidated. It is recommended that you should aim to be alert and in a quiet place when you complete the test, as tiredness or distraction may affect the results.

This is an ability test which means that the candidate cannot "fake" their performance and it measures skills that no other test measures. Whilst the test could be useful in recruiting for the funeral profession, as with any test that is used for selection purposes it should never be used as the sole criterion by which a job related decision is made. As a recruiting tool the test can determine strengths and possible problems, it is up to the MSCEIT® accredited person who interprets the results to confer with the recruiting person/company as to the relevance of the results in relation to the job position on offer.

Once completed, the test will yield an approximate 40 page report on the findings. It offers a summary of the scores followed by information on how to understand your scores in context. Although MSCEIT® provides useful information about your emotional intelligence, like all tests – it is

not perfect. It is important to understand the results in context by integrating them with other information that you have about yourself. The people who get the most benefit from this type of report are those that are open to the results and that are able to see how their results fit in with their own experience.

The MSCEIT® is not without its critics. Some argue that although it is an ability based model it tests our knowledge of emotions. In short, whilst we might know how we should behave or react in an emotionally charged situation it does not necessarily follow that we would actually behave that way.

Whatever your own thoughts on emotional intelligence testing it is fast becoming a useful tool in many large corporations and businesses. It's relevance to the funeral profession cannot be understated but it is important to emphasise that EI is just one of the many attributes we should be striving for as funeral service professionals. Our job, although rewarding, can be demanding both physically and mentally. For those coming into the profession the plethora of emotions they are faced with in those early days can seem daunting and those of us that are trainers or managers need to be able to offer our support and help. Identifying someone's emotional capabilities and where their strengths and areas for improvement lie will not guarantee success; but it will give us the opportunity to ensure that that support is directed where needed.

References:

Bardzil, P. and Slaski, M. (2003), 'Emotional intelligence: fundamental competencies for enhanced service provision', *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 13, No. 2

Caruso, D. R., 'All about the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT)

Goleman, D. (1996), *Emotional Intelligence; Why it can matter more than IQ*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing

If you would like further information regarding Emotional Intelligence testing please contact Alison direct at alisoncrake@crakeandmallon.co.uk