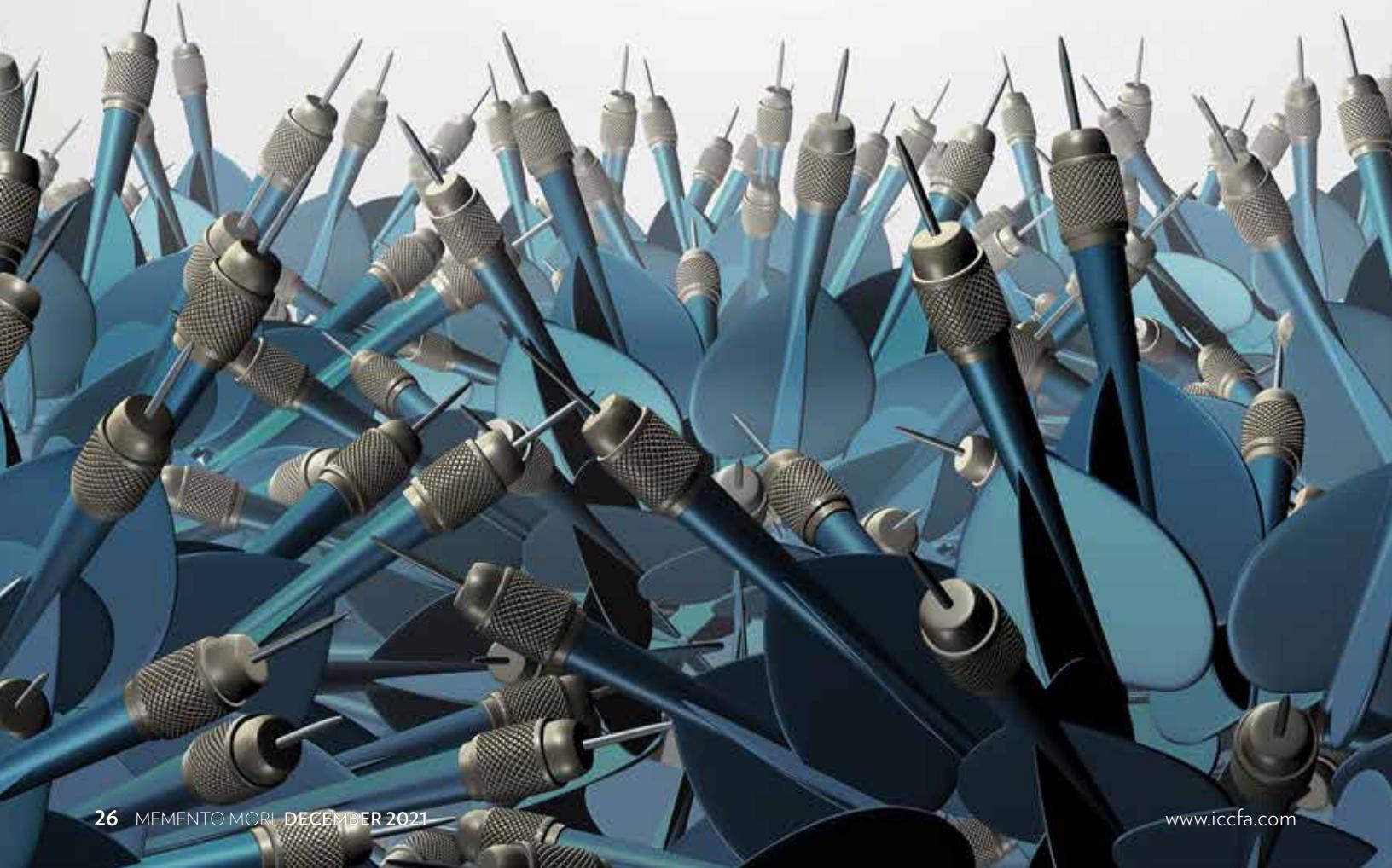




# *Working Collaboratively*

*Seven Challenges to Building a Team*

by Welton Hong



# THE AVERAGE FUNERAL HOME

The AVERAGE FUNERAL HOME has about seven employees, and half or more of them are part-time. Working in a small business where each employee wears multiple hats can translate to a lot of independent work, but even professionals in small or midsize funeral homes, cemeteries, and cremation firms must engage in collaborative work, too.

Whether you collaborate on projects frequently or pull your entire team together a few times a year for a big effort, you can face challenges. From having the wrong people on the project to allowing scope creep, collaborative work challenges can derail progress, increase costs, and reduce the value of what your team produces.

## Collaboration Is Key

Some examples of times your team might need to work collaboratively are:

- When meeting memorial or service needs for clientele, particularly when they are larger than normal or outside of the scope of regular services for your business.
- While working with external vendors and experts on efforts such as marketing.
- When tackling one-off or periodic projects, such as revamping service offerings.

Here are seven common challenges you might face when working as a team, whether on a specific project or day-to-day tasks:

### 1. Too many (or the wrong cooks) in the kitchen

Having the right people—and the right number of people—working on a project or task is critical to a positive outcome.

It's tempting to throw every available resource at an effort. Writer John Heywood famously said, "Many hands make light work." That proverb holds a lot of truth for certain tasks. If you're setting up chairs in a viewing room, for example, an all-hands-on-deck effort can drastically reduce the time it takes without impacting the quality of the final result.

That's not the case for every task. The Wharton Business School conducted an experiment to test this theory. Teams of two and four were tasked with building a LEGO figure following specific instructions. It seems like more people building would make the work faster; in actuality, the four-person teams took *44% longer* to complete the work.

Some tasks are simply better suited to smaller groups of people or even individuals. Before pulling in a part-time employee to add to the effort or including every deathcare pro on your payroll on a project, consider whether more people will add value.

You should also always consider the skills and knowledge of the people involved in a collaborative effort and whether they are a good match for the work.

## **2. Poor communication or lackluster communication tools**

About 60% of businesses do not have a strategy for internal communication; as a result, close to 75% of employees say they feel left out of the loop or worry about missing critical updates.

It's not a great situation for employee morale or productivity, and poor communication definitely hampers collaborative efforts. Investing in communication tools and plans is often worth the expense, even for small businesses.

Consider this: The average employee across all industries spends as much as 2.5 hours each day trying to find or access information required to do a job. That's more than a quarter of the average workday lost due in part to communication challenges!

When employees and others involved in a project are better connected, productivity increases by an impressive 20 to 25%.

Invest in communication tools and processes to help your team and external experts remain connected. Some options might include:

- Chat app like Slack
- Project management software like Trello
- Collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams

## **3. Working over each other or doing work more than once**

Redundant work efforts cost time and money. Most funeral homes and cemeteries do not track these types of figures, but we can look to the construction industry for an idea of how expensive "rework" might be. On average, it accounts for as much as 23% of the expenses associated with a construction job.

Reasons for redundant work might include:

- Errors that require work to be redone.
- People doing the same work simultaneously because they don't realize someone else is doing it.
- Someone redoing work that wasn't an error because there are disparate understandings of what the outcome should have been.

Strong communication and organization help eliminate unnecessary rework. One of the best ways to organize collaborative partners is to use basic project management tools. Trello, Basecamp, and Todoist are a few options you might try—some include free or low-cost tools that work well for smaller teams.

## **4. Allowing projects and efforts to get out of hand**

According to data from the Project Management Institute (PMI), between 28% and 68% of all projects

experience something called "scope creep."

This occurs when the expectations and effort associated with a project exceed original definitions. For example, you might want to work with a marketing agency to create social media content for your funeral home. You define the scope of the project and set a budget and expectations that include:

- 1 Facebook post weekly
- 3 Instagram posts weekly
- 25 Twitter posts weekly

Within a month, the marketing agency is also doing social media advertising, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and the creation of landing pages.

This is an example of scope creep. It's not that those extra efforts are bad. It's not even that they are inappropriate for your deathcare business. The problem is they weren't included in the original parameters of the project and may not be properly accounted for when it comes to your budget and other resources.

To stop scope creep in its tracks:

- Take time to define all projects and collaborative efforts well, including budgets, final deliverables, and timelines.
- Assign work specifically to each person involved in order to reduce redundancies and the chance people may work beyond what is needed.
- Create check-ins for any projects lasting more than a few days to ensure everyone is still on target and working according to the original expectations.
- Redefine expectations if there is a business reason for extending the project and you also have the resources to support the expanded scope.

## **5. Not aligning all efforts to business goals**

According to PMI data, when businesses align projects and other collaborative efforts with clear business goals, they are more likely to succeed. In fact, 38% more projects are successful when they are aligned with a business's overall strategy than when they are not.

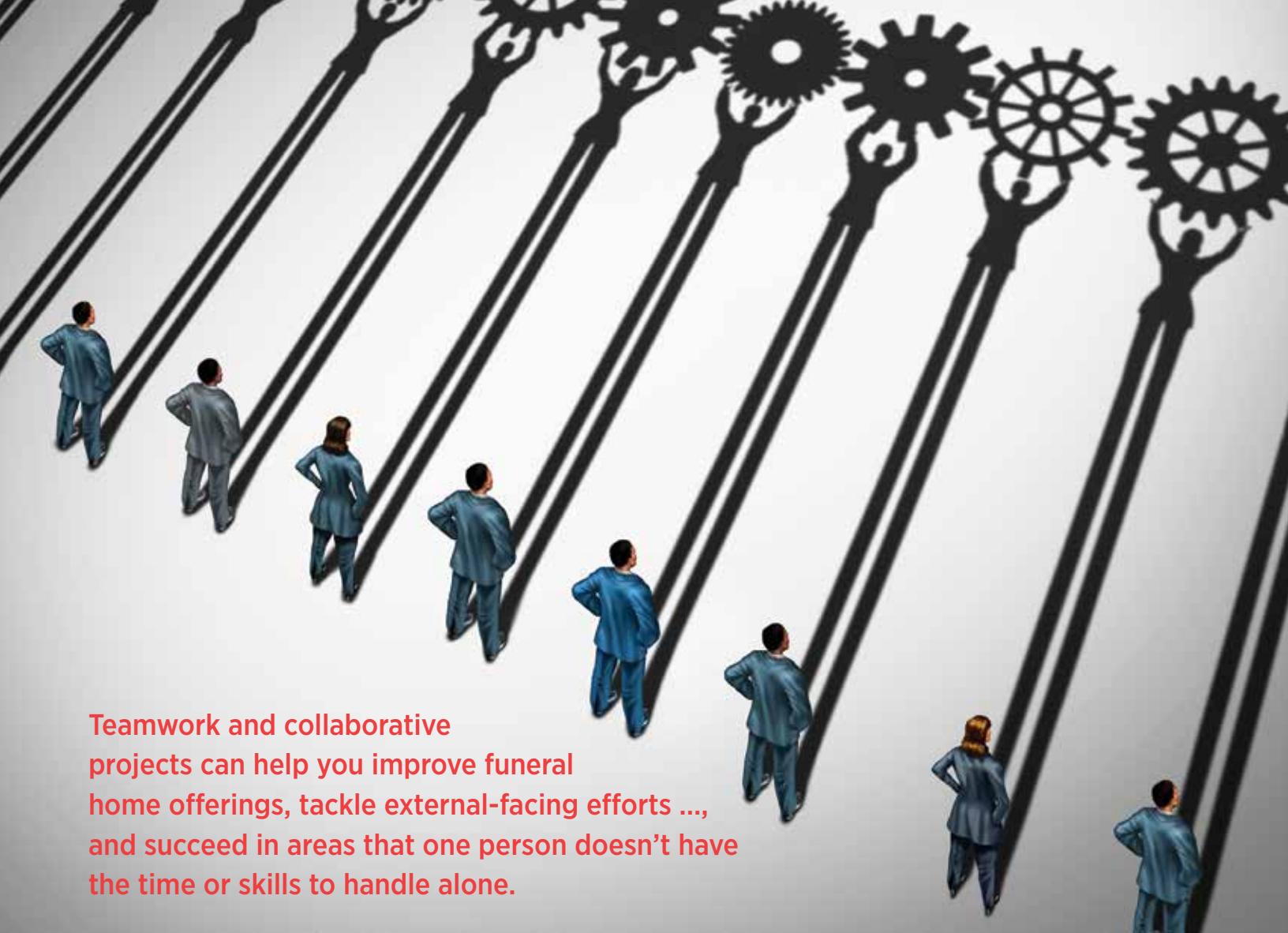
Don't just consider the purpose of a collaborative effort. Consider whether that purpose aligns with your overall funeral home goals.

Here's a good example: Online marketing efforts are often concerned with driving traffic to pages or getting likes and comments on social media posts. And while those are all indicators of whether your funeral home marketing is capturing audience attention, huge traffic or engagement numbers don't mean anything if you're not converting visitors into clientele.

In this case, a collaborative effort for the sole purpose of increasing traffic might fail. The effort must align with the business goal of *converting* that traffic.

## **6. Lack of leadership or top-down buy-in**

Empowering employees to make decisions and handle



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challenges within their own workflow is important. After all, the funeral director can't take time out of his or her day every time a small obstacle arises somewhere in the business.

But you still need leadership, and that is especially true in collaborative work environments. Ensure that:

- A financial decision-maker for the firm knows about the project, approves it, and supports it. Otherwise, you may not have the budget and resources to get it done.
- Someone is tasked with leading the effort (a project manager). That person is responsible for ensuring work gets done, though not necessarily responsible for doing the work.
- Everyone is aware of these two facts: (1) people need to know the effort was greenlighted and has leadership support and (2) they know who to turn to for direction or help.

#### **7. Forgetting to celebrate and reflect**

When people join in on collaborative efforts, they can feel lost in the weeds. Was anyone aware of their contributions? Is the effort accomplishing anything?

Take time to celebrate and reflect to ensure these types of questions are answered for everyone. If you are working on a long-term effort, set up checkpoints and milestones for this purpose. For short-term projects, have a meeting at the end.

These meetings can include:

- Recognition of various people and the team effort
- Updates on the outcome of the work
- Discussions of what worked and didn't work to improve the efficacy of future efforts

#### **Collaboration Takes Practice and Knowledge**

Teamwork and collaborative projects can help you improve funeral home offerings, tackle external-facing efforts such as marketing, and succeed in areas that one person doesn't have the time or skills to handle alone.

By knowing some of the challenges associated with collaborative efforts, you can proactively avoid them to help ensure the benefits of collaboration for your deathcare firm. □

**Welton Hong** is the founder of Ring Ring Marketing and the author of *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*.