



## Making the Best Even Better Takes a Special Kind of Commitment

*Memorial Park in Memphis is a market leader focused on engagement as a driver of growth*

Drive through [Memorial Park Funeral Home and Cemetery](#) in east Memphis, and you'll see rolling lawns, sprawling oaks, fountains, and the fallen. Here on more than 150 acres are the final resting places of soul singer Isaac Hayes, '70s crooner Charlie Rich, and rock 'n' roll pioneer Sam Phillips, who helped make an icon of a trucker named Elvis.

But casual observation doesn't reveal a passion to make a market leader even more dominant through unmatched customer service, a drive to attract and develop talent, and the level of employee engagement that has made Memorial Park one of the Mid-South's [Top Workplaces](#).

Memorial Park was built in the 1930s and touted as "the cemetery beautiful." Public parks were scarce then, so it became a place for families to gather. It even had a tourist attraction of sorts in its Crystal Shrine Grotto, billed as the only man-made crystal cave in the world, attracting over 100,000 visitors per year.



Today, Memorial Park hosts weddings as well as funerals, it has a Facebook page with more than 400 likes, and its use of surveys to measure and improve engagement among its 65 employees is paying dividends

that would be the envy of nearly any business, regardless of size or industry.

## The Attraction of a Talent Magnet

Memorial Park's general manager is Richard Williams, a funeral industry veteran who can sound like he's running a tech-heavy startup.

"Even though we have plenty of processes we have to manage, it all starts with people," he said. "So, when I started here in 2014, I shared with my management team my goal that we become a talent magnet. I wanted us to focus on employee satisfaction to such a degree that people would line up to work here. I really feel that as you get the best talent available in the building, the rest will take care of itself."

Williams admits he wasn't always so focused on people. "The first five or six years of my career I was an operator, so everything to me was about building the most efficient operation. But as I grew as a manager, I realized that none of that really speaks to growth. Dynamic growth requires another mindset well beyond policy, procedure, and compliance. When comparing business locations, you can see places that have the same objectives and the same guidelines but still they have very different results. In most cases that's rooted in the employees and how much they care about those objectives."

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At Memorial Park, Williams had to overcome issues that seem all too common: engagement hampered by interdepartmental squabbles, a reluctance to trust top management, and a feeling among some employees that they could not be heard.

“We initiated a WorkplaceDynamics survey in 2015 because we as a management group needed information that we would not be able to get directly from employees. I wanted it all measured and quantified so we could track progress. We gathered as a management team to go through the results and identify what we thought the issues were.”

## The Power is in the Why

After a less than perfect response by management to its first survey, Williams said his team made the most of the second one. He said it has been used as a:

- *Vehicle for employee feedback.*

“We wanted to create an environment where everybody could feel completely comfortable airing whatever grievances they may have, good or bad.”

- *Tool to analyze information.*

“The Online Results Tool helps us really slice and dice the data and pull out some things that aren’t in the reports. It’s great information.”

- *Measuring stick for progress.*

“Our trainer meets with each department to go over the areas where we scored well, where we slipped from last year, and to identify any root issues.”

- *Venue to present further change.*

“We meet with each group and say, ‘Here’s what we got from you, and here’s what we’re going to do in response to that.’”

Williams said, “Any time that we’re making a change or altering course in any way, I don’t just tell my team or the staff what it is we’re doing. I’m purposeful to include the why. First, it helps them understand the need for the change. Second, it helps them understand how their part fits into the broader goal. Third, and most importantly for me, it gives them an opportunity to propose a better response to address the why.”





So I might say, 'This is what I've come up with, but maybe you have a better idea for how we can combat this issue or capitalize on this opportunity.' To me, the power is in the why."

## Control, Commitment, and Dynamic Growth

Noting the societal and political conflicts that seem so much a part of modern life, Williams said that engagement at work can build not just loyalty to institutions but a greater sense of control among employees.

"They're in control of their own careers, their own days, and, to a degree, how they go about their job," Williams said. "That translates to far more commitment. And we hear that from our staff."

That kind of commitment will be solely needed if Williams is to take Memorial Park toward the dynamic growth he seeks.

"We're already deemed to be the premier provider in town, but we want to put a massive gap between our competition and us," Williams said. "We're trying to develop a service module that will take our customer service to a level that no one else can touch."

Members of the staff will be offered the opportunity to own various pieces of the push in a process that will take months. They also will be offered a comprehensive career development program.

"We want to give everyone an opportunity to grow," Williams said. "We'd like them to grow with us, but if they wind up having to go somewhere else, that's fine too. We want to invest in people, and hope that binds them to us."

Williams said even as he moves from one project or initiative to the next, he always tries to come back to engagement. "I think, 'How can I use each project or opportunity to advance the ball in the area of employee engagement?'"

He says, "I feel like we're on a good track. We've got a long way to go, but we're on a good track."