How to mentor the next generation of leaders.

By David Hand

There was a time when preparing the next generation to take over leadership and progress was pretty straightforward. The young learnt what the older people did and how they did it and then at the right time, stepped in and took over. Trades were perpetuated through apprenticeships and when the king died, you got the next king, good or bad. As education became universal, its significance became compelling and so future leaders were mentored and prepared primarily through this avenue. Our disrupted economy has undone all that. If we seek to define a leader who is going to take followers somewhere, today's challenge is to know where that "somewhere" actually is. As such, we have a leadership vacuum in business and our civic life, where the old certainties no longer hold. Witness the uncertainty in global politics, Trump, Brexit, the emergence of China as a global power, and then look at the economy, digital disruption, an uncertain business outlook, a difficult career outlook for the young and the decline of long-established industry sectors such as retail.

How do we mentor leaders in today's uncertain environment? One approach is to step back from events and look more to values and principles to guide us. After all, shoplifting was a crime when I was young and it is still a crime today, so not everything is in the melting pot of change. As someone who is still working out questions of leadership in the 21st century, the following are some themes that in my view have not changed and still apply today. They apply to future leaders as much as they ever did.

1. **Trust.**
   Being trusted is a precious thing to have. It is a place that should not be surrendered to expediency. If you develop a reputation that you do what you say you will do, that you carry assignments through to completion, it builds future opportunity for you. There is often a cost in this as options you might prefer are sacrificed to deliver already committed deliverables.

2. **Customer service.**
   There is that old saying, "The customer is always right" and the truth of this has not changed. Though on the surface it seems apparent that the customer is not always right, the point of the principle is that customers can go elsewhere if they choose and so accepting their right to define requirements that we then conform to is a pretty good way of keeping them as customers.

3. **Integrity.**
   There have been commercial disputes since the first trading began millennia ago, often with both parties believing they have been let down. Over the centuries, a code of laws has developed that provides structure for business dealings and this is a fundamental pillar of our society. When you shop at the supermarket, you expect to pay for your purchases. This basic principle applies throughout our economy. What I see a lot of today, especially through advertising and social media, is that trading has become more complex and organisations face temptations to capitalise on this but to their likely long-term cost. Do you understand your power bill or your mobile phone contract? Service providers gain an advantage through making it difficult for you to know details. Do you understand what the great social media platforms are doing with your personal information? These innovations

are running significantly ahead of the laws and regulations that have traditionally protected us but what we do have is the long-term consequences for such businesses if they do not act with integrity towards their customers.

4. **Flexibility**
   There has always been the disruption of change in our world where the old is swept away by the new and that is particularly true today. Today's leaders must continually assess how relevant existing products and services are in the face of changing circumstances. Not every innovation lasts or proves itself. Telecommuting was until recently seen as an inevitable change, where we would all do our corporate jobs from home, thus saving time, money, pollution and giving us more family time. This has not happened and is increasingly unlikely to happen as businesses understand how the loss of face-to-face contact limits creativity and problem solving. The future leader can't rely on great predictions of what will happen but must also judge events as they are actually occurring and change direction in response.