

University of SA International Graduate School of Management
Graduation Ceremony

Your Excellency, the Governor of South Australia

The Hon Paul Caica

Chancellor and Vice Chancellor

Distinguished guests

Graduates

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of speaking to you today.

To all the graduands in the room, I offer you my congratulations. This is obviously a very exciting time in your lives.

How are you all feeling - relaxed and comfortable?

What if I asked all of you in the room to stand and swap seats with another of those standing.

You might be thinking, what on earth is this fellow up to?

Well ladies and gentlemen graduates, this will happen to you many many times in the next thirty years or so. Just as you start to feel comfortable someone will come along and move you.

And this is my first point – if someone moves you, maybe you have failed.

If you want to challenge yourself both professionally and emotionally, **you** must be the person to eject yourself from that chair.

Step outside your comfort zone and be stimulated before anyone realises you need to be moved.

Many of you will go on to work in businesses and organisations where opportunities will abound for professional and personal development.

But these opportunities may not present themselves on a platter. You may have to seek them out. You may even have to create them yourself.

In preparing this brief talk I have assumed you all want to be leaders. Not necessarily THE leader but a leader of some sort – whether it be in business,

government, not for profit, health, finance, agribusiness, the church or whatever.

So for the moment forget everything you have learned (said with a chuckle – tongue in cheek) and let me share some points of view that I have accumulated during a career in sales, manufacturing operations and marketing.

My underlying themes today are:

- Managers manage systems, processes, budgets, products, manufacturing plants and so on...Leaders lead people to be the best they can possibly be....
- A widened knowledge base is a good foundation for developing new skills.
- It takes personal courage to do something new or differently and persistence to see it through...
- Leaders are judged by their ability to implement change successfully.

Here are my seven rules for those aspiring to leadership:

First, you are not climbing a ladder - you are climbing a tree.

Second, take the initiative and don't be afraid of making mistakes.

Third, regardless of your job or role you must be financially literate.

Fourth, listen, observe and read.

Fifth, think strategically.

Sixth, wherever you go and whatever you do build relationships

Seventh, be scrupulous in everything you do.

I will now quickly touch on each of these points:

You are climbing a tree not a ladder

Advancement does not necessarily mean propelling yourself up the corporate ladder in record time.

In fact, the term corporate ladder is, to me, something of a misnomer.

I think corporate tree is a much more apt and realistic description of the career path that awaits you.

With a ladder you are restricted to three options – up, down or freeze.

The corporate tree offers you all manner of choices – you can move in all sorts of directions, gathering valuable insights and experiences as you progressively make your way, in your time, to the upper canopy.

If you aspire to a leadership role, it is vital that you have a good understanding of all facets of your chosen career.

Expose yourself to as many aspects of an organisation or business as you possibly can – branch out, extend and consolidate your skills.

Learn from others. From their experiences and their expertise. Appreciate their roles and their contributions to the organisation or enterprise.

Stuffing envelopes may not be seen as the most glamorous of jobs, but I would thoroughly recommend you take some time out to sit in the chair of the person whose job it is to stuff envelopes.

A broad base of skills and experiences provides you with an ability to genuinely empathise with others.

If you aspire to be a leader and you want to engage and effectively communicate with others, previous experience in a range of jobs is a huge advantage.

So that's my first message to you – burn the ladder, go out on a limb – climb the tree and expose yourself to as many learnings and experiences as you can.

Second, take the initiative and don't be afraid of making mistakes.

Some time ago a new recruit walked into my office and suggested we change one of the processes in the department. She said it would save hours of time and be much more productive. I agreed. Her idea was a resounding flop.

None of us are mistake-proof, thankfully. It would be a dull, boring world if that was the case.

However what she did next was a complete surprise. She emailed everyone, admitted her mistake and asked for their thoughts as to why. We then put in place a new process that answers her original problem. And she learned the value of thoroughly consulting with other stakeholders before proposing and making changes.

Put your hand up, show initiative. You will be recognised as the person who is willing to go the extra mile.

If that means taking on extra work or working harder, then fine.

It will make you stand out from the pack and the experience will stand you in good stead.

Third, regardless of your job or role you must be financially literate.

You are all leaving today with a well-deserved degree to your names.

That tells me that you are smart; you can think, that you have analytical capabilities and that you are all theoretically competent.

However if you are going to be successful in leadership and management in your chosen career, your financial literacy skills need to be very strong.

This is not just a nice thing to have – it's compulsory in today's world.

Finance is the *language* of business the one thing every organisation has in common – the numbers. I often wonder what it would be like if everybody in an organisation understood the financial impact of what they do. It would be much easier to align all team members to the corporate mission and strategic objectives and avoid some of the nonsense and politics that is far too prevalent than it should be.

Talk the language of the boardroom and articulate financial factors and bearings. Most board members have strong backgrounds in finance and risk management.

So learn about the profit impact of whatever you do – this will make your business case much easier to sell and you will become a better manager and a better leader.

Fourth, listen, observe and read.

You may have been top of your class, but is that going to be enough to get you to the top in the workplace?

The leadership qualities required to do that are born from a combination of factors, including those professional experiences I mentioned earlier, as well as understanding, observation and self-education.

Observation of those people whose habits and behaviours you admire the most or who inspire the most is a must. It's the old watch and learn philosophy.

Also I cannot emphasise enough the importance of continuing with your professional reading. Set aside time and develop the habit of reading your chosen professional publications on or offline as a matter of routine. The Australian Financial Review daily, The Economist each week and the Harvard Business Review every month are good places to start – and of course there are many others. Enroll in short courses postgraduate study and you will still be in the minority amongst your peers.

They should become part of your staple reading diet and will provide you with a good grasp of current issues and an appetite for even greater knowledge understanding and hopefully prepare you for the habit of lifelong learning..

Fifth, think strategically

It doesn't matter whether you become a manager, scientist, engineer or a vicar you will need to maximise your effectiveness. Hard work is not sufficient. You will need to learn to think strategically – only then will you select the correct problem to solve, and then learn work out how to solve it creatively and cost-effectively.

There are no short cuts to thinking strategically. Read whatever you can on the subject and then every time a task comes up that requires some strategic thinking stick-up your hand engage your brain and take on the extra work.

Sixth, wherever you go and whatever you do build relationships.

In my career I have taken the time to build relationships with key people at all levels within organisations and outside of them. It has been an extremely worthwhile investment. Why?

First when mistakes are made, they are less likely to be expensive ones if you have built meaningful relationships in which trust, honesty and respect are the foundations. Issues can be resolved much quicker and damage can be contained. And it is a great way to attract mentors - who will help you even more.

Second, don't restrict yourselves to building relationships with senior personnel. Consider this –

Another challenge likely to confront you comes in the form of the “new millennials”.

It's not a virus or some debilitating disease.

The “new millennials” is a term coined for the next generation of employees post Gen Y – and you, as future business leaders, are going to be faced with having to accommodate them in the workforce.

This new breed of worker is likely to test every leadership quality you possess.

I read recently that this new generation will, I quote: “want to roll into work with their iPods and flip-flops around noon but still be CEO by Friday”.

They have the expectation that they will automatically win and will always be rewarded, even just for showing up – as they have done all their mollycoddled lives.

They will have amazing technical skills but a childhood filled with trophies and adulation won't have prepared them for the cold realities of work.

As a result, you may well find yourselves acting more as coaches, rather than bosses.

So be prepared.

I'm kinda glad I'm now self-employed!

Finally seventh, be scrupulous in everything you do.

In my view there are too many half-truths in business and management these days. This is a difficult issue to address at a function like this but I firmly believe if you are scrupulous – in other words careful to avoid doing any wrong even in small matters – you will be a better manager, a better leader and a better person as a result.

So there we have it – all the issues of being a good leader and manager solved in ten minutes! But there's just one more secret on management and it is reputed to come from Bill Gates – he said:

Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one.

And that reminds me of another apt quote from another notable, Churchill I think. It goes something like this: "at the age of 16 children think that their parents know nothing and at 21 they wondered how their parents learned so much in such a short period of time".

Good luck to you all and thank you for inviting me.