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# Building Breadth

A.G. Coombs has diversified its capabilities, services, and staff with a holistic and cohesive approach to business.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

With a range of fully integrated companies under its wings, building-services specialist the A.G. Coombs Group has expanded its services and reach across Australia's eastern seaboard. The group focuses on air-conditioning, refrigeration, mechanical services, fire protection, electrical power, lighting, and building technologies in commercial and industrial facilities.

In operation for almost 70 years, A.G. Coombs has developed a strong reputation for designing, developing, and delivering quality projects across Australia's building construction space. From design, construction, and commissioning through to service, maintenance, technical advice, and support, A.G. Coombs has utilised its experience and expertise to assist a diverse range of clients and their projects.

Russell Telford, Managing Director of A.G. Coombs, has been with the

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company for 26 years and has progressed through the organisation, seeing all facets of this accomplished group of companies. He assumed the role of MD 13 years ago and has steadily expanded the group's offering. He recently spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about how A.G. Coombs has fostered growth and development across its services and staff.

**The CEO Magazine: How have you transformed the A.G. Coombs Group since becoming MD 13 years ago?**

**Russell:** I think strategically we've implemented quite a strong business model in terms of growth and development. We expanded the business in a number of ways and we've also grown the group geographically. We believe that we have built a business platform that has set the organisation up for the next 10 years.

We've gone from two integrated core businesses, being projects

and service within the group, to seven companies. That's covering geographical spread up the eastern seaboard and extending our services from just projects and service and maintenance to advisory and technical operations. We've also added technical breadth to what we do in building services, as well as an end-to-end, whole-of-life model in what we can deliver. It's been about getting a firm footprint in place to allow all our businesses to organically grow.

At the same time, we've also positioned the business for the next generation as a corporatised, private model that puts us in good stead in terms of perpetuation as a successful private business.

**What would you say have been the most notable achievements for A.G. Coombs in recent years?**

I think the key achievements are the sustained growth and development of the group, including the attraction, retention, >

and development of quality people. In the past 10 years, we've grown from just under 200 people to more than 500 people. To do that, you must have a strong ability to attract, develop, and retain quality staff.

At the same time, you also need to grow your own people from traditional graduate and apprenticeship-type entry points. Our training, learning, and development programs have been core to our attraction and retention of staff. Our ability to bring people in at these entry points, and grow and develop them—while also introducing new personnel with different skill sets at other levels as we've diversified and grown—has been critical. It's a real people formula challenge.

**How do you engage and communicate with employees?**

We have a remarkably flat structure. As a private company with around a couple of hundred people, I knew everyone's name

and who they were. As we've grown and developed, I've met everyone along the way. We have a really good HR support model around training and people. Within our private structure, we've retained certain attributes from our culture which require us to know all our people and have a high level of engagement with them.

I think that an open-door culture, and that focus on knowing who our people are and what they're working on, is vital. We back that culture up with different forms of communication, whether it's our employment conditions, briefing sessions, social events, training programs, or our intranet—all of those things are built to really keep engaging our people and maintain that private-company feel.

We still have a family feel to the company. We have things like Kids Club and social clubs. We cross-train between our businesses quite

a lot—anything that fosters that sense of cohesion and belonging within the A.G. Coombs Group of companies.

**How do you ensure that you attract and retain the right people and then ensure they maintain this strong culture?**

We're hand-picking people to join the company, whether it's a young graduate or a senior executive. We're looking for the right fit; we're just as concerned with that as we are with the skills. About 15 years ago, we spent quite a bit of time documenting our culture and values. We detailed them and set them out in two concise documents, and we still use those documents today. It's the ultimate test in terms of what people are signing up for and whether they understand our values and culture. Again, it's about constantly reinforcing those values through our processes and decision-making. Culture is defined by actions.

Culture isn't just the 'fit' of leaders or the senior management team; it's about every one of our employees. If someone doesn't fit within our culture, it soon becomes apparent. We're good at maintaining our culture, but, more importantly, encouraging people to be a part of what we're doing.

**What are your core values?**

We have eight core values, and they're very detailed in the way that we describe them. The headings for the values are: value to others, results not excuses, just culture, continuous improvement, good corporate citizen, excellence through people, leadership, and teamwork.

Sitting under each of those values is a detailed explanation of what each of them means. It ensures people understand what is expected.

**How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to foster growth and development?**

It starts with the professionalism of the company and how you engage and treat suppliers and partners along the way. We pride ourselves on our business standards, and often it's simply basic things like doing what you say you will do, paying in line with terms, and doing all the right corporate things. We do look to engage the supply chain in our growth plans. We share our vision and plans with key partners, and we openly collaborate and work differently with key elements of the supply chain. We do have some formal supply agreements, as well as memorandums of understanding and documented alliance outlines. We have a number of tools that we use to formalise our relationships.

There are also informal relationships that we work to maintain. We want suppliers to be looking to add value, and often in that there's a process we might set up in the supply agreement around reviewing and identifying opportunities. We like win-win situations. We want our suppliers



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to do well. We like to get feedback from them, and we want them to be engaged.

**Where do you see the industry going?**

I think the industry has been in one of the most difficult periods that I can remember in terms of the extent of change we have seen. Some longstanding companies aren't here anymore, and we've seen a lot of consolidation among the larger players in the construction industry. We've seen new entrants into the market in the property sector. We've weathered a lot of turmoil around industry changes post GFC. I think there are some strong trends that have emerged out of that change, particularly around technology and work practices. Building Information Modelling is a huge part of the shift we are seeing.

We're also seeing a change in requirements in people's roles, in terms of the delivery of project work and client requirements. Equally, I think there's a real risk in terms of our supply chain and the stability of businesses in general. The challenges are demanding more component, professional, well-structured, and reliable suppliers.



**What's your long-term vision for A.G. Coombs?**

Our vision is very clear: We will continue to be the leading building-services specialist provider in Australia. We need to maintain our ability to bring value to our clients through leading technological change, innovation, and our expertise.

At the same time, we will focus on doing more integrated project delivery, particularly within collaborative delivery models. There are strong organic growth opportunities around what we're doing. It's about maintaining a progressive leadership position in what we do and continuing to create a point of difference to negotiate and deliver better outcomes for our clients. ●

**You can judge a good company by the company it keeps.**



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