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# A LEGACY OF QUALITY

The Hickinbotham Group, a proud company now in its sixtieth year, almost didn't survive the recession that followed the collapse of the State Bank of South Australia in the early 1990s.

Images courtesy of Hickinbotham Group

**M**anaging Director Michael Hickinbotham talks about the values that enabled his company to survive that period and become one of the largest and most successful builders in Australia.

Michael Hickinbotham has a family heritage of innovation and hard work. As managing director of the Hickinbotham Group, he is the third generation to take the reins of the construction business, building on the family company his father, Alan David, and grandfather, Alan Robb, established in 1954. "I always worked in the family business as a kid and really loved the environment and camaraderie with the subbies, all of whom were very kind to me. I was a brickie's labourer and a labourer for a concreting gang, which was an invaluable experience. This was an era when we mixed concrete for a lot of jobs by hand and wheelbarrowed it in. I really learned the meaning of hard work. I worked both on site and in the office during my university years. So I got a good feel for the industry and the business from an early age."

Coming into the family business, Michael was already in good stead to help get the company back into the black. "I joined the family company in 1993, but it wasn't in good financial shape to meet the icy headwinds that blew after the State Bank disaster hit the South Australian economy. I spent the

next 10 years with my brother turning it around. We re-engineered the whole business: closed our interstate office, sold most of our assets, cut our cloth to meet the difficult market conditions, and generally worked out how to get the company back on track. That was 10 years of hard work, but the company is going well now as a result of the tough decisions we made during those years."

Since taking the top office in 2002, Michael has introduced various initiatives to further grow the company's reach and capacity. One such project is the South Australia Housing Centre, which was implemented to encourage young first home buyers into the housing market and help strengthen Hickinbotham's position. "We are a strong number one, and that's through our market-leading Hickinbotham and Statesman brands. We saw a niche in the market to assist younger people who are currently renting even though they are earning good money and aspire to home ownership.

"We saw an opportunity to tap into that market and help these people. It's been going well; we only launched the brand a few months ago, but already it's on a solid footing and we have a roll-out program for new villages. We're building the platform for the brand step by step."

As a family business, Hickinbotham is built on strong

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- Michael Hickinbotham

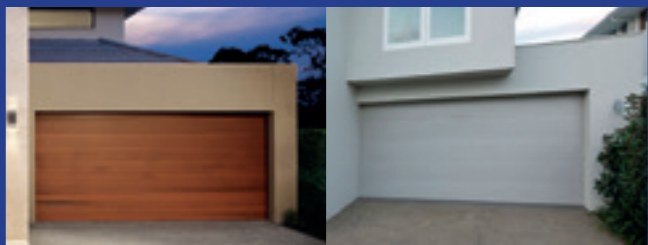
principles that resonate throughout the company. "It's our total commitment to providing fantastic value that sets us apart. Our catchcry is 'Build with the best'. But the whole basis of the company is founded on the idea that we give our customers fantastic value for money—the best of everything a homebuyer would want, but at the most competitive price. So we talk about offering our customers the best—which is about providing the best value, designs, quality, service, and build times. But when you actually boil it down to a single principle, value is the dominant one.

"This is complemented by a further overarching principle—we are passionate about improving the lives of the people we deal with, whether they are our customers through beautifully designed, well-built homes backed up by fantastic service, or the people that work here, by providing them with challenging and fulfilling work. This principle is inculcated throughout the DNA of the organisation and goes back to my father and grandfather. Whenever anyone talks to the staff, these values are reinforced in a very positive way."

Hickinbotham works closely with its key suppliers and subcontractors to maintain the premium quality that the company is known for. "The suppliers are a key part of the whole value chain and they are fantastic. They really understand what we are trying to achieve here and they do >



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their best to help us achieve it, so we see it very much as a partnership.

“We are in constant contact with them. We are always developing new housing products, and they work proactively with us on that process. They often have new products that they want to talk to us about, so we have regular contact there. And then there is the review process that occurs at least once a year. One way or another, there is a strong connection with our key suppliers directly through me and my key managers.”

Michael notes that he owes a debt of gratitude to his father and his brother, as both have been instrumental in the development of the Hickinbotham Group and his own understanding of the business. “I thought the world of my father; he was just a brilliant person. One thing I really admired about him was that he was very community minded. To be truly successful, you have to care about your community and do your best to improve it where you can. My brother ran the building business for a long time with my father and worked hard to lay its strong foundation. He is now running the family wine business and has applied the same principle of providing fantastic value to achieve accolades for his wine.”

While the Australian construction industry is experiencing volatile conditions, Michael is determined to carry his family’s legacy forward. “I have always believed that if you do your best by the people you are serving and you are committed to providing excellent value for money and fantastic service, you will always hold your own.

Michael is a CEO who is proud of his company’s past and optimistic about its future. “I believe in our product, our team in the office and subcontractors, who are fantastic; and our ability to constantly innovate to make our homes and service even better. So my belief in the future is product-driven, service-driven—and ultimately, within the context of our entire organisation, it’s culture-driven.”

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- Michael Hickinbotham

“Often the best advice a CEO can receive is from other CEOs. Imagine being able to build on your success, exchange experiences, share advice and connect in an atmosphere of trust and mutual support.”

JOHN KARAGOUNIS  
Managing Director, THE CEO CIRCLE



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