

Resilience, Flexibility and Innovation

These are three words that keep cropping up in conversation with local business leaders about how our region is fairing in the current climate. Overall, the indicators for our region remain relatively positive and the recent South Island Indicators Report (produced by Deloitte and the subject of a key note address at next weeks Aspire Conference*) shows that business leaders remain optimistic about the future.

Resilience is one of the key strengths of our region's businesses – many have withstood the test of time and can recall past hard times – and are confident about surviving the current challenges. Our experience as a region dependent on seasonal highs and lows also means we are well placed to weather the current economic storm that is hitting particularly hard overseas and in some sectors of our New Zealand economy.

The ability to respond to changing markets and jump at opportunities is also a characteristic of many small and medium sized businesses. Since small and medium businesses make up over 95% of our region's enterprise numbers, this ability to be flexible is another key factor in our regions favour in the current economic climate.

The fundamental need to identify new ways of doing things, new products, or innovative packaging or marketing hasn't changed. But what has changed is the urgency for business owners to grasp change and act on it. Their ability to adopt and exploit innovative responses to changing conditions is more important than ever. A good case in point is the latest in text marketing as this medium uses technology to extend marketing reach and grow a customer base (text marketing is also covered in next week's Aspire Conference).

Resilience, flexibility and innovation, however, are not enough. A recent Chamber luncheon speaker, Professor Brad Jackson, of the School of Business, talked of the importance (and challenge) of authentic leadership and 'courageous followship'. Authentic leadership is where leaders act with integrity and model the behaviours they are looking to foster – for example, a commitment to quality customer service; a commitment to excellence in design and production; positive, honest and clear communication with staff and customers. They are leaders who generate a 'come with me' attitude and inspire through actions as much as words. Jackson quoted a recent New Zealand study where only 37.4% of respondents judged their leaders as displaying 'Authentic Leadership' behaviours 'fairly often' or 'frequently, if not always'. So, clearly there is room for most of us to improve! Gaining the acceptance of followers is seen as critical for leaders in New Zealand given the closeness of the power distance between leaders and followers and the high level of personal connections.

In our region, the sense of community and close connections is a real strength and, provided the leadership is clear and genuine, there is no lack of 'courageous followship'. The challenge for us all is to ensure we continue to pull together, play to our strengths and support each other to be effective leaders. For the Chamber of Commerce, this means providing opportunities for business owners to share experiences and build

connections as well as opportunities to learn and grow their business and their leadership skills. Our upcoming Aspire conference is one such offering and all people involved with business are invited to attend.

Dot Kettle is Chief Executive of the Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce.

*Aspire is the Chamber of Commerce ½ day Conference being held on Thursday 21 May from 1pm at Seifrieds and offers an exciting line up of speakers and presentations to help you position your business to maximize future opportunities. To register or find out more, visit www.commerce.org.nz or email info@commerce.org.nz