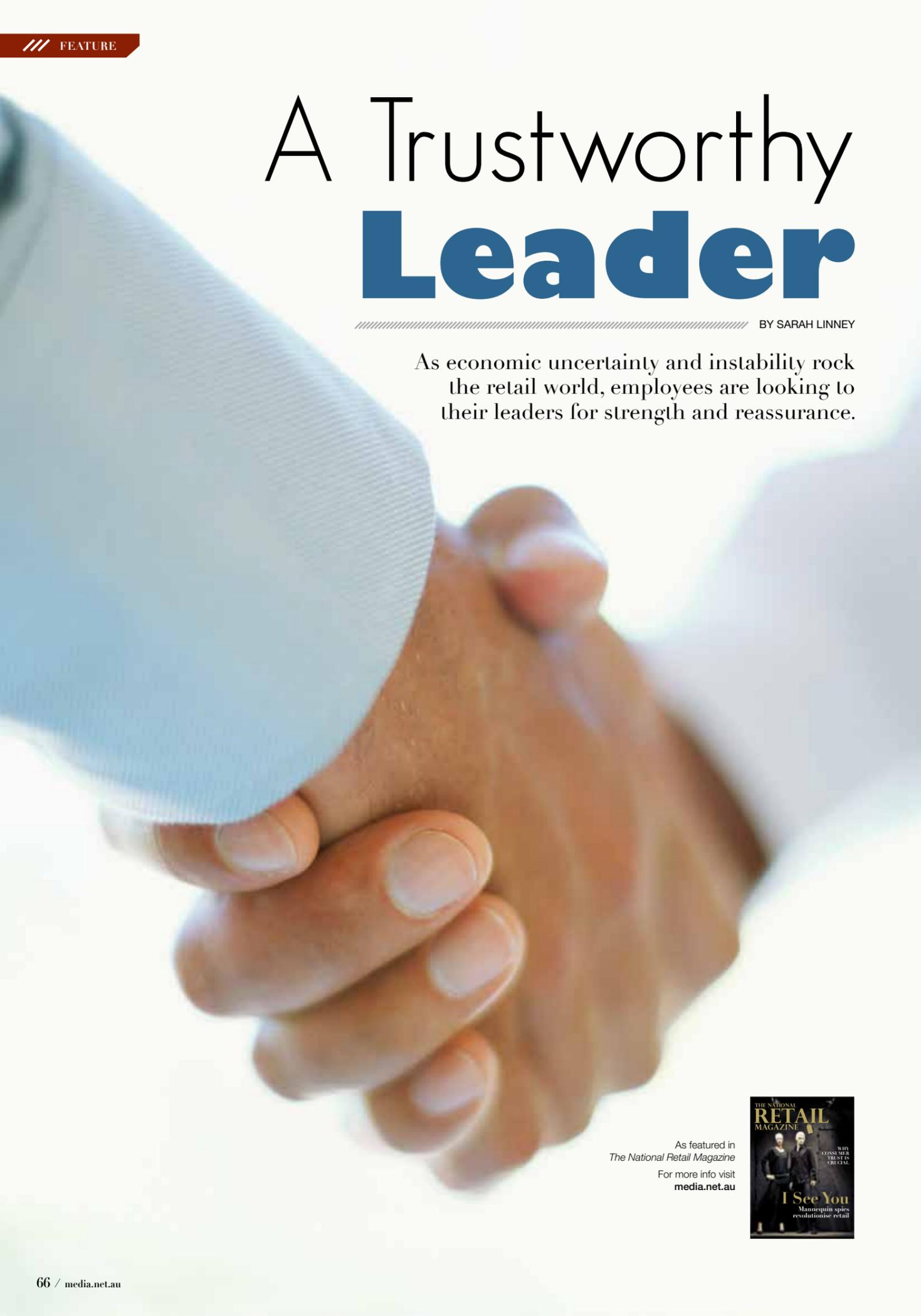


A Trustworthy Leader

BY SARAH LINNEY

As economic uncertainty and instability rock the retail world, employees are looking to their leaders for strength and reassurance.



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In this environment, leaders must engender trust and respect to ensure their employees feel secure and stable, despite tough economic times. To explore this issue, *The National Retail Magazine* spoke to two leading experts about the qualities and behaviours of a trustworthy manager.

Michalle Faulkner is a human resources expert, with more than 20 years of experience. Author of *The People Investment: A jargon-free guide for managers and business owners to getting the most out of their staff*, she stresses the importance of earning your employees' trust.

The Australian Institute of Management's Young Manager of the Year for 2012, Nicole Kersh, started online retailer 4Cabling in 2006 at the age of 21. Since experiencing rapid growth, 4Cabling now has a team of 17 full-time employees under Nicole's no-nonsense leadership.

The National Retail Magazine: How can a leader ensure their employees trust and respect them?

Michalle: I am a believer that trust is incredibly valuable. It's not just given; it's earned. You must demonstrate certain qualities for your employees to trust and respect you as their leader. People trust, like and respect those in leadership roles who are honest, are authentic, give firm but fair direction or discipline, and inspire others.

“In order for people to trust you, you need to let them know who you are as a person, so that they feel safe in trusting you. Never shy away from hard situations.” - Nicole Kersh

They don't just turn on their interest when it suits them. If they ask about an employee's children or how their holiday was, it's because they really do care about the answer. Never fake interest, never forget that your team members are human beings with feelings, and never treat them as numbers or an afterthought.

Nicole: Trust and respect is a two-way street and they have to be earned. I really believe in leading by example and always acting with integrity. I am very transparent with my team; we

don't hide anything. Our vision is a shared one and we have worked really hard to create an environment where our team feels safe and valued. We encourage feedback. It's not always easy to hear, and it can be difficult not take it personally sometimes, but if you make an effort, people will treat you with respect and trust you. In reality, you will probably spend more time with your colleagues than your family in a working week. Trust, integrity and mutual respect are important in any relationship.

My parents owned their own cable-installation company, so I grew up with that entrepreneurial spirit. There is something very enticing about being able to make your own rules, take your own risks and create a life that you want for yourself. I watched my grandparents do it and I watched my parents strive towards it. It's something I always wanted for myself.

I think my journey to management was unintentional at 21. When I started 4Cabling, I had no idea how rapidly it would grow or what that actually meant, practically. In my mind I had an idea; I took a risk and it paid off. At the time, I had never imagined that would translate into managing a staff of 20. Having very little professional and life experience at that age made it hard to effectively manage a growing team. I learnt to trust my instinct and rely on my staff. I have learnt a lot from talking to people about their jobs and their experience with management.

In your opinion, what makes a good leader?

Nicole: Integrity. Always follow through and be true to your word. If you tell someone you will get back to them, make an effort to do so. In order for people to trust you, you need to let them know who you are as a person, so that they feel safe in trusting you. Never shy away from hard situations.

When I received the 2012 Young Manager of the Year Award it came as a bit of a surprise. I have a very unconventional approach to management. As an entrepreneur and business owner, I'm really involved with the business on a number of levels. I'm probably a bit more 'hands on' than your typical manager.

I think it's really important to get to know your team and how your business works, from the bottom up. I like to get my hands dirty and lead by example. There's nothing I won't do, whether it be packing orders, serving customers or helping the sales team out. I like to get involved and build solid relationships with my team. ▶

“As the rate of technological change intensifies, it will become increasingly important for leaders to use their fundamental communication expertise and remember that face-to-face interaction and connection with fellow workers and employees are essential.” - Michalle Faulkner

Michalle: A leader to me is someone who is trustworthy and reliable. Not only turning up on time, but being reliable in their mannerisms so that their personality style doesn't waver, regardless of the situation. Their employees can know and trust a leader who, rather than throwing their hands up in the air or exploding in anger in a crisis, will proactively consider solutions, share those with the team, communicate the 'real' situation, and work collaboratively together on a solution. They don't leave others to work out the solution on their own. Trustworthy leaders are those who are genuine in nature and good communicators.

What behaviours and attitudes should a leader possess to engender trust?

Nicole: Integrity and transparency. You need to be able to stand up in front of your team and share your vision. You can't expect people to join you and give the best they can if they don't see the whole picture.

Michalle: Leaders should be good listeners; they should keep people informed, and they should be trustworthy and consistent. A leader should always be approachable, with a positive attitude, but not afraid to make the tough decisions when they're needed. We are conditioned to show respect to leaders because they are often the business owners or our 'direct report'. However, it's very difficult to do this if the leader is inauthentic, or if they lead by fear or intimidation.

How can a leader encourage a culture of respect throughout their company?

Michalle: Leaders have followers. That is what sets them apart from a traditional manager who focuses on how things get done in the business. Of course, this is also important as managers often enforce order and control. Most of the time, managers are looking at how the required tasks are implemented within the business and the steps that might have to be taken to overcome roadblocks or challenges.

However, leaders have vision and influence. They embrace creativity and imagination, and encourage the team towards the objectives. In essence, they need to win hearts and minds. By doing so, a natural by-product will be gaining voluntary commitment from the team members themselves.

Nicole: It's all about keeping up communication. At 4Cabling, we are very transparent and, in turn, very proud of what we do. Our staff and customers respect us for this. We share in our successes. When a customer emails us to thank 4Cabling, we pass that on to the entire staff. When we win an award or break a record, we share it with them. Our success has really been a team effort; I can honestly say that it's not attributable to one person. Creating a sense of gratitude and teamwork really builds respect and encourages people to want to succeed and be part of a successful business, especially one in which their contributions are respected and valued.

How will leaders of the future establish trust and respect?

Michalle: Team members want to work with people who are genuinely interested in them, and who inspire and engage them. They spend a long time in the workplace. Sharing the vision of the business and including everyone in the rewards is a must. Incentivising, when goals are achieved, will give your staff much more enjoyment in their work and career.

A leader of the future is going to be more concerned with implementing ideas and building relationships and rapport with others to inspire, engage, and encourage initiative. They will be empathetic and appreciate the interconnection of events and decisions and how they relate to the people in the business. As the rate of technological change intensifies, it will become increasingly important for leaders to use their fundamental communication expertise, and remember that face-to-face interaction and connection with fellow workers and employees are essential.

Nicole: I think the current generation of leaders are generally more open and less hierarchy-obsessed than leaders from past generations. They seem to relate more to flatter organisational structures. While there are some brilliant examples of current and past leaders who ticked these boxes and conformed to the traditional hierarchies, higher levels of transparency and accountability are becoming the norm these days. I think that with more and more Generation Ys taking up leadership roles, we can expect trust and respect for leaders to grow naturally. It won't be forced. It will just happen. 🐦

