

BUSINESS

Small Business: The post-Covid 'Great Resignation' or 'Great Disconnect': What Inspired Learning expert says

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Wade Jackson is also the founder of Covert Theatre in Auckland. Photo / Supplied

Comedian Wade Jackson, founder of corporate coaching business Inspired Learning, explains how he uses humour to help improve workplace relations and the latest trend sweeping workplaces in New Zealand.

What does your business do?

Inspired Learning is a high-performance coaching business. I do keynote talks, facilitate workshops with a number of programmes around high performance on topics such as self-leadership, resilience, creativity and storytelling. I facilitate workshops and sessions around those as well as doing leadership coaching.

What was the motivation for starting it?

My background is in improv theatre. I do the Christmas shows and office parties doing Improv Bandits and they asked me if I could get people working together like that, so back in the '90s I started doing my team-building workshops and presentation coaching based on my experience of being on stage.

How big is your team?

It is just me. My programmes were originally licensed internationally so I had a global licensing company but I wanted to focus on being more local again and scaling things down.

There's a lot of talk about the "Great Resignation" but you talk about the issue from the lens of the "Great Disconnect". Is that what you're seeing among workforces?

There are people who love working from home and remotely and love having that flexibility, and then there are those who aren't set up to work at home; working in flatmate situations or with young children, or who don't have an office, so there are people who have been screaming to get back into the office.

[TOP](#)

On the whole, we are a social species and we do need to come together so one of the things around the great disconnect and working hybridly is that we still need to have time face-to-face with people and that need is never going to go away. There are people in the workplace feeling disconnected because they are not connected to their team and then there are people feeling disconnected because lockdown has given them a sense of knowing what is really important to them and they are not really getting that sense of meaning from their work. Before, those people may have been happy to clock in or clock out and exchange their time and energy for money, now they are feeling that surely there has got to be more to it than that.

Some people are definitely learning how to be human again. I've been running a session called Connect to get people spending time to connect working with each other again rather than just being a face on a screen.

I'm holding workshops for corporates and small firms too, as well as working with some AUT students as well. It is not just employees but students too who have spent the last two years on screens as well, so we've been working on building up confidence and connections.

I work with small companies as well as big corporates. I've just started work on a leadership programme with a stormwater draining company and then two weeks ago I was in at Fonterra talking to global supply chain leaders, so I work with everyone from ASB to Z Energy.

Employers are working hard to get fun and energy into the workplace. It's been a serious couple of years with people under a lot of stress and they are trying to figure out how to get that playfulness back into the workplace. Other recent clients have been Auckland Transport, AUT, Fonterra, MediaWorks, Meridian Energy, Spark, TVNZ, Westpac, Hunch and Nufarm.

What advice do you give to employers on looking to revitalise their workplace?

I draw heavily from the principles of improvisation and improvised comedy; a lot of my work is playful in itself as I draw from that art form, it is all about getting people to practise being present; that plays a big part in enhancing human connection.

There's issues we've had before Covid that are still there around workloads and stress and pressure that comes with the workplace, but added into that is financial pressures now with mortgage rates rising, and the cost of living increasing, so it is about when you are in the workplace figuring out how to be fully present and connecting with each other. And quite often we find the team that plays together stays together. If you are in and out of the office or have some people on the screen and some people in the room, then that can be disruptive. Technology is great that it has allowed us to work through lockdowns but it is not as good as being face-to-face with people.

What happens if employers and employees can't reconnect like they had pre-Covid?

I think some people will but I also think some people are unable to; and that's where people don't necessarily resign and leave the job, but they kind of disconnect as they are in the job and I think that is more of a concern - when someone has left you can replace them and put someone who is engaged into that role.

Even before Covid we had a large number of people who were disengaged, and I find often that is because the employers aren't telling an effective story - to be able to get people engaged with what they do. It is usually always about the process and getting the result, but they are not really connecting to their people. It is a fundamental human need to have meaning in our lives. We're all going to shuffle off this mortal coil - and we spend more time at work than we do at home, if we take sleep into account, than we do our loved ones, so we want the work to have some meaning. We all get stuck in the grind, but we need more storytellers.

Over the last few years I've done a lot of resilience work online and now that we are out of lockdowns I am doing a lot more storytelling work because I think organisations are realising the need to engage people's hearts and minds. Leaders need to think about the value the business offers the community and how do we communicate to our people so that they feel they are serving something bigger than themselves. The storytelling workshops are taking up the most amount of my time these days.

Are you working on any big projects currently?

The theatre is my big project. I opened a theatre right before lockdown hit so making sure all of our shows survive has been a focus for the last two years. It has managed to survive. We've recently had the Office Comedy Class and the Laugh Gym as the two big projects at the theatre looking at how to get more fun and laughter into organisations. We had TOP final last week where we put [businesses in teams] - we have large and small businesses taking part - and we teach improv for eight weeks and then they compete against each other on the stage of the theatre.

For Laugh Gym, our business subscription model, organisations pay a monthly fee for tickets that they give to their staff, clients and family to come into the theatre to watch shows. We're aiming to move laughter not only for entertainment but also into the wellbeing space and I think people need more of it.

How are you finding being a business owner?

I've never been employed, I've always owned my own business for the last 25-plus years. I had to go through the whole adaptation during lockdown too.

What advice do you give others thinking about starting their own business?

When you start a business you are sacrificing security for freedom, and I made that decision when I was 20 years of age; that I wasn't going to get a job and that I was going to focus on freedom. You have to be certain that you are comfortable sacrificing security. Know what your values are if you are going to go into business for yourself.