

Audio transcript – ‘Wish someone told me’ with Nat Locke – Episode 4: Langer Chiropractic & Soft Tissue Therapy

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Nat Locke: So we're up to instalment four of *Wish someone told me* where every episode I'm talking to a successful small business owner about the rollercoaster ride that is owning and running a small business. My next guest is a kindred spirit. He runs a very successful chiropractic clinic in Perth. Jonathon Langer, well, he's been at it for a while now and he knows a thing or two about staffing, business management, the dreaded tax time and also spine alignment, of course.

Nat Locke: He also has no trouble delegating tasks, something that can be hard to crack. Get it? Crack? We'll chat about being a great boss after this.

Male voice: You're listening to Wish someone told me with Nat Locke.

Nat Locke: Running a small business can be a lot of hard work, so Bankwest has pulled together some tools to help you succeed. To download templates for your business plan, marketing plan and cash flow forecasting, and use online calculators to suss out your cash flow and loan repayments, just jump online to bankwest.com.au/connect.

Male voice: This is Wish someone told me with Nat Locke.

Nat Locke: Jonathon Langer is the proprietor of Langer Chiropractic & Soft Tissue. Welcome, Jonno.

Jonathon Langer: Thanks, Nat.

Nat Locke: So you've been in business since 2002?

Jonathon Langer: Yep.

Nat Locke: Were you massively mentored? Did you have a business plan going in? What was your business history before you started the practice?

Jonathon Langer: Business history was zero. I had no idea what I was doing, actually, except that I was brought up in a family where my Dad owned his own businesses.

Nat Locke: Yep.

Jonathon Langer: But he advised me when I first left uni, when I had a couple of options where I could go and practice. His opinion was I should go to this particular practice because they seemed to have more of a handle on the operation of a small business.

Nat Locke: Right, okay.

Jonathon Langer: Because he saw a massive limitation in me, I'm certain of that.

Nat Locke: So he sort of pushed you in this direction so that you could learn on the job how to run a business from another practice?

Jonathon Langer: I just think he recognised that it wouldn't be all about going in and fixing people up.

Nat Locke: This is the thing. This is the thing that you and I both have in common, is that when we went into business we thought, oh, we just roll out the shingle and people turn up and you fix them and then they may go home, right?

Jonathon Langer: Absolutely.

Nat Locke: A bit more to it?

Jonathon Langer: Absolutely. A lot more to it and I think, even still, anyone coming out of uni does have that impression a little bit. They obviously get the opportunity to observe practices who have been around for a while and it seems like it just all rolls quite easily once you've been doing it for a while. But clearly it doesn't happen that way to start with.

Nat Locke: So you went and absorbed how to run a business from this other practice that you worked in?

Jonathon Langer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nat Locke: And then you decided you wanted to go it alone and do your own thing?

Jonathon Langer: Correct. Yep.

Nat Locke: So what was the process? For you, what was the hardest part of that process?

Jonathon Langer: Actually, at the time, the hardest part was finding an appropriate building.

Nat Locke: Yeah. It's harder than you think, all little detail stuff, isn't it?

Jonathon Langer: It was, it was. And, in fact, the first building I looked at, which was about maybe four months prior to leaving my practice, and which I immediately dissed as being inappropriate for what we needed, ended up being the practice I've been in for 16 years.

Nat Locke: And you're still there, aren't you?

Jonathon Langer: I'm still there, yep.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: And it's actually a perfect building for me.

Nat Locke: So why did you think it wasn't a perfect one at the time?

Jonathon Langer: Too small, too big, too everything. Perhaps I was looking for excuses why not to jump in.

Nat Locke: Sure. And did you know anything about negotiating a lease with a commercial landlord or any of that sort of stuff?

Jonathon Langer: No, I didn't know anything about that, actually.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: But again I had my dad on my side and he's pretty savvy at that sort of stuff. But even still I did have no experience with any of that. In fact, people will tell you that my Mum made my bed until I was about 22. So I actually had to do nothing by myself right up until...

Nat Locke: And since then you just haven't made your bed.

Jonathon Langer: Exactly. The bed's still not made but, yeah. So, no, I had no experience whatsoever.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right. And then you started the business and I guess whilst it's not the sort of business that has stock or a retail element, staff is probably one of the biggest assets that you need in your type of business. How did you go about recruiting staff that were gonna fit with your business?

Jonathon Langer: Well, that's an interesting story. I had no plan. My wife, who was in business, she said, "Oh, my PA's best friend is looking for a job." And I went, "Cool okay, well how about I meet her?"

Nat Locke: That'll do.

Jonathon Langer: That'll do. And it was about 6:30 in the morning and she rocked up with a massive black eye. And I employed her for just on 10 years.

Nat Locke: First impressions count.

Jonathon Langer: First I said, I think I said, "I don't actually want to know what happened." And, anyway, she was my first interview and my only interview at that stage. And she is still a good friend of mine, and she worked with me for 10 years.

Nat Locke: That's pretty amazing.

Jonathon Langer: It was a cool story, yeah.

Nat Locke: Yeah. And have you had much turnover of staff over the years? Obviously you've got more than one staff member now. So have you had to recruit a lot or do you find they stay for a long time?

Jonathon Langer: We've been fortunate in that we've got all the people that work with me currently have done for, well, there's four of them that have been 10 years plus. One that's six years plus and another one that's she's probably into her third or fourth year.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right.

Jonathon Langer: So we've been very lucky in that regard.

Nat Locke: What's the secret to that?

Jonathon Langer: Number one, I think being a nice person helps. To your staff or to the people that work with you. I think that's what makes my business as, I'm not going to say easy, but it runs well and I feel comfortable leaving the business because I've got the same people who have been there for such a long time. And I would say to anyone who asks me "What's the most important thing about your business?" I would say, "It's the people that are in it."

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: Because it is an absolute nightmare trying to find the right person and...

Nat Locke: Yeah, it can be really difficult or you find the right person and then they have to go on maternity leave or their husband gets posted over east or something. You know, stuff like that. I lost a few good staff members that way. And it's like, you know, when you get the good ones you need to hang onto them.

Jonathon Langer: You do. And that was actually a lesson that, again I refer to my dad, and he had two of his admin assistants for 20 years plus in his business.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right.

Jonathon Langer: And he often said once you find them, however you do it, treat them well and treat them with respect and reward them appropriately because it's more of a headache than not when you lose a good staff member.

Nat Locke: Yeah. How did you even decide how much to pay them? That kind of thing. I mean, I don't need to know the hourly rate, but did you just decide or pay more than the award, or, you know...

Jonathon Langer: Are you looking for a job?

Nat Locke: No, but all of our producers are 'cause they don't want to work with us anymore.

Jonathon Langer: I definitely had a look at the award rates and I've always believed that paying above the award rate is of good value.

Nat Locke: It's a good start, isn't it?

Jonathon Langer: And I think that is a good start. But also I would say that the monetary rewards lose their significance reasonably quickly. So you can give a raise, for example, and it's all there's a lot of

excitement around that. But if there's not other supportive and positives about being in your business...

Nat Locke: Yeah. It's not the only thing, is it?

Jonathon Langer: It's not the only thing.

Nat Locke: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You strike me as the sort of guy who would be a bit of a dictator at work, you know, just sort of yelling at the staff all the time.

Jonathon Langer: Pretty much. You got me spot on. One of the girls said to me the other day, "I heard you raise your voice the other day." And she was surprised. But I was watching the footy, so...

Nat Locke: Oh, okay. Well, that makes a lot more sense, yeah, yeah. Okay, so staffing it, that's one thing. Then you've got to get patients in through the door because that's the lifeblood of any business is your customers.

Jonathon Langer: Yep.

Nat Locke: How did you go about that?

Jonathon Langer: I was fortunate when I left the practice that I was previously working at, purely out of goodwill I have always given my mobile phone number. And when I left and aptly named my practice, what I did with my name in it...

Nat Locke: After yourself, yes. Yes, they found you fairly easily.

Jonathon Langer: I was pretty easy to find. And so I was very pleasantly surprised in the first month that I went from a practice and very innocently my behaviour very early on probably helped me to hit the road running, so to speak. So really that was that I didn't have a plan for how I was going to get people in the door.

Nat Locke: Yeah. Because at the time chiropractors weren't allowed to advertise broadly. You know, there were a lot of restrictions

on that sort of thing. So do you do contacting sporting clubs and things like that? Getting involved that way or get your name out there any other way?

Jonathon Langer: I've never really done any advertising. What I did for a little while, and it was simply accidental, I got asked to do a couple of public speaking gigs.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right. Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: Which a couple of those were really helpful to the development of my practice.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right. Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: One of them was to about 500 people at a school seminar for staff. That was early on in my practice and that was quite significant. And from that I did a little bit of public speaking which helped generate patients and at least get a little bit of exposure that way.

Nat Locke: Yeah, and I'm guessing that referrals from your existing patients is the other big way that you get new business?

Jonathon Langer: Yep. Yep, I'd say that would be about 90%, 95% probably.

Nat Locke: Yeah. That's the benefit of using the clients that you've got to build your business, isn't it?

Jonathon Langer: Definitely, yeah. I think in that respect, someone who's been personally referred comes in with a degree of trust and/or respect already. Whereas someone who may have been cold called will come in not knowing you. Perhaps a little bit suspect.

Nat Locke: Yeah, a bit sceptical. Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: A bit sceptical and not really have the trust that someone who's a friend or brother or a husband or wife or whatever is coming in who they may already have an opinion on.

Nat Locke: It's like a personal endorsement, isn't it?

Jonathon Langer: Yeah.

Nat Locke: Yeah, yeah. And you reward people that refer patients?

Jonathon Langer: Yeah, we do try to. And, you know, number one is simply a thank you because I think that can be...

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: People are sometimes embarrassed to say thank you, I've found.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: In fact, I was one of those early on.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: And that's probably something I've learned over the years that people like to be thanked, and that's something we try to do.

Nat Locke: Yeah. And when it's heartfelt, I think it makes a difference. You know, if it was just like your receptionist does this and has just signed a card and send it off in the mail, and it's just with a label that's printed out by a computer. It doesn't have the same impact as a phone call or just look them in the eye and tell them thanks.

Jonathon Langer: Sure, yeah.

Nat Locke: It makes a difference, doesn't it?

Jonathon Langer: Absolutely, yeah.

Nat Locke: Yeah. And what about bringing other chiros in? 'Cause I know you do have one other chiro working with you and you've had another one for a short period of time. Why did you decide you wanted to bring other people into the practice?

Jonathon Langer: That was probably so I could take my holidays, I reckon.

Nat Locke: Yeah, okay.

Jonathon Langer: It was something that I always wanted to do was to work with somebody, with other people. But it's also something that I searched for a long time to try and find the right people.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: Because as much as having good people is so important, having the wrong people can obviously be disruptive to any culture and in any industry, I guess.

Nat Locke: Yeah, to everything. Yeah, exactly.

Jonathon Langer: So it took a long time and John who works with us now, and he's been in my practice for over 10 years as well. So, look, it was one thing to have holidays.

Nat Locke: Once they get in they can't get out, can they?

Jonathon Langer: No, I lock 'em into long-term contracts. Personal investigators find out any dirt and we hold them over a barrel, basically.

Nat Locke: They're not going anywhere. Yeah, exactly.

Jonathon Langer: Yeah.

Nat Locke: And then you did get another associate practitioner a couple of years ago.

Jonathon Langer: Yeah.

Nat Locke: But not for long. So tell me about that process.

Jonathon Langer: Well, yeah, look, again we needed another chiropractor to look after the volume, I guess.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: And again we took a while finding or looking to find somebody. And she was probably with us for about maybe 12 months.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: But as you know, in our industry, my take on it is that philosophically we've all got our own take on things.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: And I just think we probably weren't as well aligned as what I perhaps may have thought we would be.

Nat Locke: Aligned, yeah. Us chiropractors, we talk about alignment a lot.

Jonathon Langer: Yeah.

Nat Locke: When it's misaligned it's just not gonna work.

Jonathon Langer: That's right. So it's not that it didn't work.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: It actually worked quite well and there wasn't anything, except that we were perhaps traveling on slightly different paths and it was a good thing to recognize that early.

Nat Locke: Yeah, yeah. What do you like about being your own boss? Anything?

Jonathon Langer: Yeah, No, look, I'm just trying to...

Nat Locke: Narrow it down.

Jonathon Langer: I'm trying to narrow it down. Like there's so much upside. You know, whether that's choosing your hours, whether it's, I guess, choosing over time the culture of your business.

Nat Locke: Yeah, yeah.

Jonathon Langer: It comes down to how we operate the business and how I want to operate the business, I guess.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: Of course, holidays, et cetera. It's always good to have that, the ability to work the hours that fit into both family life, 'cause I've got two kids. And, I guess as I think about it a bit more, probably the greatest benefit is that I do get to spend time with my kids either taking to school or picking up.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right.

Jonathon Langer: And have the ability to attend some of those things, which is important to me.

Nat Locke: Yeah. Because you can determine your own hours. You've got that flexibility.

Jonathon Langer: Pretty much, yeah.

Nat Locke: Yeah. It's the work-life balance that people talk about, I suppose, isn't it?

Jonathon Langer: Absolutely, yeah.

Nat Locke: And what don't you like? What do you see as the disadvantages of it?

Jonathon Langer: Well, you touched on work-life balance and I'd say that early in my career I was a part of two practices. And I didn't realise it at the time but I would say that my work-life balance definitely became unbalanced.

Nat Locke: Was out of whack.

Jonathon Langer: That was a really good lesson for me when I was about 30.

Nat Locke: Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: And I changed things pretty much from that time when I realised that my balance was out of whack. And, I mean, that's been a massive learning curve. It could have been a massive heart attack or something more sinister than just being burnt out, you know?

Nat Locke: Yeah, sure, sure. Exactly. Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: So that was something I didn't like about being my own boss because I would openly say I burnt out reasonably young. But I learnt a lot from that so no one can accuse me of burning out now, I wouldn't have thought. Especially not my family. Or the people that work with me.

Nat Locke: They're sick of the sight of you. And what about all the, I don't want to say boring, but the mundane tasks of running a business? You know, the meeting with accountants and tax time and all those sorts of things. How do you go with that stuff?

Jonathon Langer: I hate all that stuff, to be honest. I'm a good delegator.

Nat Locke: Yeah, right.

Jonathon Langer: I am, so I've got a great clinic manager, I've got a great bookkeeper, I've got a great accountant, I've got a great IT manager. I've recognised pretty early that I'm not good at much in business, so I delegate well.

Nat Locke: Well, there's a skill in that too, isn't there? Isn't there? If you can't do it yourself, delegate.

Jonathon Langer: Yeah.

Nat Locke: Because it does take the pressure off, I guess. At the very beginning, did you try and do it all yourself?

Jonathon Langer: I did do it all myself, yeah. And then there would be a lot of troubleshooting about what I had...

Nat Locke: Done wrong.

Jonathon Langer: Done wrong. Mostly to do with numbers.

Nat Locke: Sure.

Jonathon Langer: You know, I did all of the reconciliation of accounts and all that sort of stuff, as you do when you first start out.

Nat Locke: Yeah, yeah.

Jonathon Langer: I mean, I don't think there's any other way to do it. But I did work out early on that that wasn't my strength. And, you know, I took steps to...

Nat Locke: It's time you could have been spending seeing patients.

Jonathon Langer: Yeah, or playing golf or whatever the case may be.

Nat Locke: Yeah. Doing almost anything else.

Jonathon Langer: But, you know, I think recognising where you have a talent and, more importantly, recognising where you don't has probably been an important part of my longevity in business, I'd say.

Nat Locke: Now, this podcast is called Wish someone told me, and is there something that you wish someone had told you at the very beginning so that you could have done it right from the start?

Jonathon Langer: I think the biggest thing for me has been that as I touched on my first employee, who I became good friends with, I found it very difficult to... we became friends very quickly.

Nat Locke: Yes.

Jonathon Langer: And then I found it very difficult to pull her up or criticise her work 'cause we became friends.

Nat Locke: I know exactly what you mean.

Jonathon Langer: And I wish someone had have said to me, which I say to people now, and that is set a predetermined time every week to sit down and talk to your staff and say, "This is where you're doing well, this is where I'd like to see some improvement." Because then it's not so confrontational.

Nat Locke: Yeah, that's right. If there's a set meeting time that makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? So that that's what that session's for and then you can go and have a drink afterwards.

Jonathon Langer: That's right. Well, spot on. But at least then you know that if I've got something I've got to bring up, in the past, early in my career, I would have either sat on it and done nothing and let it stew...

Nat Locke: Yeah, let it fester. Yeah.

Jonathon Langer: Let it fester or I would just ignore it. And obviously if you ignore it, it becomes a norm and then it can keep becoming a bigger problem.

Nat Locke: Yeah. Alright. Thanks for coming in, Jonno.

Jonathon Langer: No problem.

Nat Locke: Great insight into your business. Now get back to work.

Jonathon Langer: Beautiful. Thanks for having me.

Nat Locke: Don't forget, Bankwest has a bunch of tools and calculators online to help your business succeed. Head to bankwest.com.au/connect to check 'em out.

Male voice: Next time on Wish someone told me...

Nat Locke: In our final episode we've got running a small business all wrapped up with a little bow for you. I found a place that can help with everything from tax time to staffing to social media marketing and business plans. Definitely worth a listen.



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