

LESSONS FROM AN “UNLIKELY” FRANCHISOR: LEADING THROUGH ADVERSITY



The following is an adapted extract from “Unlikely” sharing key insights on leadership, entrepreneurship, and resilience in the franchising context.

In life and business, unexpected challenges often shape our paths in ways we could never anticipate. My entrepreneurial journey, particularly through building and franchising Back In Motion, is a testament to the power of resilience, faith, and unwavering commitment to one’s purpose, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Here are some takeaways from that journey to inspire leaders, entrepreneurs, and individuals seeking to align their values with their work.

1 Embrace Your Inner Imposter: Use It as Fuel

Like many leaders, I’ve struggled with imposter syndrome—feeling as though I didn’t belong, doubting my right to lead, and fearing exposure as a “fraud.” When I franchised Back In Motion, these feelings were amplified, especially because franchising in the healthcare sector had a tarnished reputation. Yet, rather than letting these doubts cripple me, I used them as motivation

to learn, grow, and push beyond my comfort zone. Each risk taken—from leaving stable employment to scaling into franchising—was a leap into uncertainty. But these leaps became a driving force to prove, especially to myself, that I belonged in the space I had created.

Franchising, in particular, tests your belief in yourself. It requires balancing the expectations of a diverse group of franchisees with the business’s broader goals. Early on, there were moments when I doubted my ability to manage such growth. However, rather than shrinking back, I chose to see these doubts as a challenge. I dedicated myself to understanding not just the business side of franchising but the human side—how to create a culture where each franchisee felt valued and supported, and where imposter syndrome became an impetus for improvement, not defeat.

2 Resilience in the Face of Public Scrutiny

In 2018, I faced one of the toughest challenges of my career when a major media outlet published false accusations against Back In Motion. The syndicated article

attacked our franchise model, threatening to undo two decades of hard work and growth. While this media storm could have destroyed everything, it became a defining moment. Rather than retreat, I confronted the crisis head-on, focusing on what I could control—maintaining the integrity of our business, communicating transparently with franchisees, and hoping that the truth would eventually prevail.

Franchising opens you up to heightened public scrutiny. When something goes wrong, whether it’s a dissatisfied franchisee or an unhappy customer brand experience, the entire network can be affected. Yet, this crisis reminded me that true leadership is defined not by avoiding adversity, but by how you navigate it. Staying grounded in my values and leading with transparency allowed us to weather the storm.

3 From Humble Beginnings to Purpose-Driven Leadership

Back In Motion started with humble beginnings—a small carport clinic and \$360 in supplies. Initially, I had no intention of franchising, but the business grew, and the opportunity to scale became clear. Despite

the poor reputation of franchising in our sector, we took a calculated risk to build Australia’s largest allied health franchise. What fuelled this growth wasn’t just a desire for profit but a deep commitment to providing quality physiotherapy care and serving disadvantaged communities.

Franchising taught me that true leadership requires a purpose-driven approach. Aligning your business with a higher purpose—whether it’s improving lives or revolutionising an industry—helps you persevere through the toughest challenges. This higher purpose became the foundation of our franchise, allowing us to focus on long-term impact over short-term gains.

Moreover, franchising isn’t just about financial growth—it’s about empowering others. Building a franchise network allowed me to see the transformative power of shared vision. Each new franchisee wasn’t just starting a business; they were becoming part of a community committed to a greater purpose. This collective drive for quality and care is what set us apart in a competitive market.

4 The Power of Faith and Family

In times of doubt and difficulty, my faith and family became my foundation. Whether I was navigating the growth of the business or dealing with a public relations crisis, I leaned on the strength of my faith and the unwavering support of my loved ones. Franchising, with all its complexity, requires more than just business acumen—it demands a strong emotional and spiritual foundation. Family is an integral part of any leadership

journey. For me, my family has been both my anchor and my inspiration. The long hours and the sacrifices that come with growing a franchise network are more manageable when you have a strong support system. Similarly, the relationships we built within the franchise network became an extended family. This sense of belonging, both at home and within the business, gave me the resilience to push through tough times.

Adversity to Opportunity

Adversity often feels like an insurmountable challenge, but it can present an opportunity for transformation and growth. The COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example. Like many businesses, we faced uncertainty, and the future of our franchise network was at risk. Yet, it was during this time that we discovered the strength of our business model. Our franchisees came together in unprecedented ways, supporting one another through operational challenges and maintaining the standard of care our patients had come to expect.

This experience reminded me that entrepreneurship, particularly in franchising, requires adaptability and vision. As we navigated through the pandemic, I saw firsthand how franchisees adapted their operations to meet changing circumstances, often turning to digital solutions and innovative ways to deliver care. What seemed like a crisis became an opportunity to strengthen our relationships and improve our processes, proving once again that adversity, when embraced, can be the catalyst for long-term success.



UNLIKELY



ABOUT JASON T. SMITH:
Jason T. Smith is an accomplished entrepreneur, having built and sold five businesses including the Back In Motion Health Group, which was acquired in 2021 by ASX-listed Healthia for more than \$100 million. Jason is also the author of three books, including his memoir Unlikely (Ark House Press, 2024), a keynote speaker, and founder of the Iceberg Leadership Institute.

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5 Redefining Success: The Long Game

Franchising, like any entrepreneurial venture, challenges conventional definitions of success. For many, success is measured by growth, profit margins, and accolades. While those are important, my journey has taught me that true success is about much more than financial rewards. It’s about the relationships you build, the lives you impact, and the legacy you leave.

In franchising, success is especially about resilience. There were moments when it would have been easier to give up, especially during the media attack and the global financial crises. But staying focused on the long game—on the vision and purpose behind the business—allowed us to survive, and eventually, thrive. The ability to endure through adversity, to redefine success on your terms, is what sets great leaders apart.

Whilst I was an accidental businessman, a reluctant franchisor, and a somewhat unlikely entrepreneur, the determined focus on the long game, coupled with a deep sense of purpose, allowed Back In Motion to grow and endure against all odds. ❖