

Kerensa Johnston / Wakatū Incorporation

As Ali mentioned, we have a rich diversity of businesses in our region and I'm incredibly excited to hear from one of our leading multifaceted companies, Wakatū Incorporation.

When I first met Chief Executive Kerensa Johnston, she spoke of our collective responsibility as businesses to lead, enable and protect our people and our community. In doing so, we must be able to trust and empower each other.

Wakatū has been working incredibly hard across their businesses to build trust, knowledge and, in her, words shape hearts and minds so that the journey to reduce emissions becomes part of who they are as individuals as well as a company.

Welcome Kerensa, and thank you for joining me.

Kia ora Jodie thank you for having me.

So tell me more, how did you get started on this journey and what have you learned? What do you do? How do you learn what to do?

I think, like many other organizations here in Te Taihū, the start for us was seeing the impact that the climate crisis is starting to have and, of course, will have in the future.

So, as the traditional landowners here, almost all of our land is in coastal areas. So our sacred places, our waihi tapu, our burial places, our marae, and as well as that, from a business perspective, almost all of our businesses are based in low lying coastal areas. So, whether it's the impact of storms or the impact of fires over the past 20 years or our increasing understanding of what sea level rise will do, we knew we had to take action.

I think connected with that is that long term obligation that we have to care for our community. So making sure that not only are we making the best of what we have now in terms of the land and the businesses and our taonga or our resources, but also planning and preparing for that future stage.

And where did you look when you started? Where did you look to find inspiration or insights, to learn to engage with people and to think about “what does this mean for us as a business”?

Yeah, that's quite a deep question, actually, because I think when we began this thinking and work in real depth as opposed to conversations and perhaps not going into it to the depth that I think we now are, what struck me the most was that these conversations and this work around the climate is deeply personal. It's wrapped up in people's identity and connection to land and place and community.

So that for us was a real learning in terms of trying to access people that we felt were aligned with us in terms of their thinking and their love of the land, regardless of their cultural background or their history.

And I think that's one of the key things that we've learnt as we've been doing this work. We've come across lots of people who are like minded and actually really committed to this place we call home.

So for us, trying to strengthen those relationships and community has been really important.

What have been some of the biggest challenges you're facing in the emission reduction or even addressing the climate change threats to the land and how have you started to tackle them from some tangible examples?

So, in terms of the challenges, if I just answer that, I guess with a very local answer and then a more outward global response, I think the first challenge for us has been around Mindset.

So we have an organization at peak roughly about 650 people working across Wakatū throughout the year. And many of those people are working directly on our land or on our water. And so before we could even begin the work around data analysis or collection, setting targets and so on, we had to work on Mindset. So trying to bring everyone along and recognizing that everybody was in quite a different space in terms of their understanding, their interest. And so again, trying to work out what's important to people and really attack the heart rather than the mind was really key.

And I think you look around the world, I think one of the reasons that young people and school children in particular have been so successful is because they have very simple messages. They can cut through all the technical language and can just articulate in a way that is a real call for action.

And so we've been watching that and then trying to work at that level, recognizing we have to do that before we can actually introduce quite intense change management programs through our organization. That's been the local challenge or one of them.

And then of course, globally we will all have this in common. At the moment, I think the pandemic has just accelerated the concerns that we had around business models, economic models, reliance on supply chains, globalization and the impact of trade, all the positive things that can come from that but also all the negative things.

Observing that and then thinking really hard about how we might respond to that locally again has been a big challenge. But I think, again, that's one that we're really committed to, as I know many others are in our community.

Based on the learning and you talk about how kind of on the different levels that you need to engage, are there any tips that you would give another business? That said, we really need to think from that people centric approach? Where could we start, what are some things that we could try?

I think what has worked well for us is we've spent a long time getting really clear on what we think our purpose is as an organization and then how does that impact on our employees, their families, our broader community and of course the people, the families that own Wakatū.

So being really clear on why we're in business, why we exist in the world and then as well as that, articulating the values that we want to apply to every decision, commercial decisions, decisions about what we contribute to and what we don't, how we spend our time. And that way again will be different for every organization, whether it's small or large. But I think if you collectively have a very strong sense of purpose and values, then you can use that to drive every decision and it makes decisions actually much more manageable in a really changing environment.

And did you find working one on one with a lot of your, whether it's suppliers or partners, that that was really important or were you working through groups or together with other organizations in doing so?

I think a combination of the two. So for us, looking to other organizations that are doing things much better than us, or are further ahead and trying to learn and accelerate the pace of change, if we can, by being a bit smarter has been really key.

I mean, that's been interrupted by the pandemic because we haven't been able to get out and about in the way we would like to. So we're hopeful that the next couple of years there

will be much more of that face to face engagement and actually going and looking at case studies of actually what people are doing on the land or in their operations.

I guess one challenge, if I think about individuals where we have struggled a bit is, it's quite easy to access quite high level conversations and professional spaces where there's lots of great conversation and insights happening. But actually accessing the analysts. The scientists. The people on the ground able just to do the day to day groundwork that absolutely needs to be done has been quite a challenge for us. Just that having that capability in our community and being able to draw on that when we would like to.

So that's one challenge, and one response to that is to upskill our own people in those sorts of areas of expertise where we can, if we can't bring that expertise in from outside of the area.

Excellent. Have you been able to find good support from other businesses in the region and trying to tap into that extra capability that we need? So I expect a lot of that is shared across businesses.

Yeah, absolutely. So New Zealand businesses are sometimes accused of being sort of too inward looking and competitive with one another, when actually the real competitive advantage is in working together.

But I haven't seen this area as being an example of that. I've seen the opposite.

So real goodwill and openness in terms of sharing information and knowledge has been our experience that's been hugely positive.

Excellent. Hopefully we can do more. Now, you play a big role in the social fabric of our community and you also play a real leading example in the economic environment. One of the things that a lot of our businesses have to think about is this feeling of a trade-off between profit and social good and how they balance their role in the community and ensuring that their business continues to exist, really. How do you manage those conversations and do you have any advice for businesses as they go through those thinking processes?

I always think of a business or a company as it's just a collection of people, a collection of people who have come together to do something. So I take it really personally I don't believe in this kind of corporate veil or concept of a company being separate from the humanity that we all are.

So again, whether you're a small, there might be one or two people or you might be a very large organization, to me, you're a collection of people who come together with a common purpose, underpinned by values to achieve something.

So, again, for me, I think doing that work, as I said earlier, understanding that, again, it doesn't matter, it's not about size, it's about really understanding actually why you're getting up in the morning and working with the people you're working with and what it is you're trying to achieve.

And again, I think business decisions, commercial decisions, are not black and white. They always impact on people, they impact on our environment. Of course they have a financial impact, but that's just one component of all the things that need to be considered.

Fantastic well, certainly insightful. I love to hear the ambition that you have that focuses on your purpose and your people. And it's such an important thing for all of us to remember, no matter where we are as the development of our business, no matter how big or small we are and how we can all work together and building the capability that we need for our whole community.

So thank you so much for joining me and I look forward to many more conversations.

Thank you, Jodie, kia ora.