# Take on Board

Transcript – Samantha McGolrick

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Samantha McGolrick about the power of organisations to improve the health, happiness and resilience of our society. First, let me tell you about Sam. Sam's niche is in educating board members on effective governance and leadership of well being health and safety matters as a means through which the board can cultivate a culture where people feel they matter, and create spaces where people leave work in a better condition than when they arrived. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Sam.

Samantha McGolrick 0:32

Thanks, Helga. I'm really excited to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:35

Thank you. Well, we've been talking about this for a while. So it's awesome that we finally got to have the conversation. But of course, before we have the conversation about health and well being, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me what was young Sam like, and when did you get your first inkling that you might end up where you are now?

Samantha McGolrick 0:54

Yeah, probably never had an inkling of where I'd let's see. Young Sam, so I'm a Canadian. Born in Thunder Bay, which my mother in law seems to love the name of that city. But yeah, Thunder Bay, in Ontario, that's the East Coast. I moved over to the west coast when I was about three. I grew up in Vancouver. I miss it desperately right now given I can't very difficult to get home during these times. But grew up in Vancouver, graduated high school and didn't go to university didn't have the grades at that point, but wasn't interested at all. Anyway, I went to Europe did my overseas travels. I loved traveling, I spent six months in Edinburgh working there met friends had relationships that you know, grew life there and didn't want to come home frankly, came home for about a year, maybe two years, and decided had to go back traveling. And that's when I arrived in are decided to head over to Australia because I could do another long venture on the working holiday visa. And came over here in the year 2000. I travelled around here for a bit I've seen a lot of Australia had loved this country to bits haven't left met my husband about a couple months into me being here. spent a bit of time my working holiday visa ran out here. So I spent a bit of time in New Zealand to try to stay in the vicinity, I guess the region did some work in Christchurch adore New Zealand as well. So I really love this this area of the world couldn't stay any longer though, because Visas had run out. So my husband and I decided that yeah, we want to make a go of this. So I went home to get my... come back as a student. And so that's when I decided to go to university. I was 29 years old. You know, I'm the person in the groups at university where everybody's like, get in her group, she does all the work.

Helga Svendsen 2:59

That mature age student of the back that that serious about actually learning, rather than just the experience of university. Yeah.

Samantha McGolrick 3:07

Yeah, that was me. I would show up to class and I'd be like, Oh, no, I read everything that I was asked to. They're like you I read it. What did you guys do last night? Oh, we were out? We did? Like, how? How can you come to these classes and not understand what they're talking or not do the reading. So yeah, the bit of a, as you say, mature student kind of nerd that everybody wanted to be in my group projects are beyond my group projects. So why graduated from UCS that's where I went to Uni and started at Deloitte. And at that time, that's where I was very interested in sustainability when I left University. And in fact, I started as a PA at Deloitte that didn't go so well. And I didn't make that probation period. And, but at the time, as I say, I was really interested in sustainability. So when that didn't work, I, I asked if they had any roles in the sustainability team. And they did. So I made the shift a lateral move over which was very nice of them. And then there was no work in that area. But guess where there was work? health and safety. And my boss was like, you can come and do I got plenty of work. And I've never looked back. That's pretty much where I how I kind of fell into health and safety, went to UNSW and got my graduate diploma and health, safety and environment. A few years later. And I left alone about five years after being there and started my own kind of consulting business, doing much to what I was doing at Deloitte, auditing system development. But it's in the last three years that I kind of had this shift in where I wanted to focus my energy and our last three to five years, I started working more heavily with boards and executives on governance frameworks and all that jazz. And that's where I really saw that I had more of a, I guess where my mission or where my influence was best place is that I could speak and talk to governance. And I enjoyed it better than, you know, developing some of the systems stuff. My whenever I go away on holidays, my friends, like, there's a safety exam, I look at this, they don't have this, they don't have this. There's no life jackets in this little boat in, you know, in Thailand.

Helga Svendsen 5:20

Okay, so it's brought you to this space around health and safety, but it's more than health and safety? Well, it's more than what people traditionally think of health and safety is probably a better way of putting it. And, and I part of your view is that, you know, organisations have this real potential to improve. Yes, the health and safety, but also the happiness and the resilience and the well being of our society. So if organizations have that role, then boards also have a role in that. For boards, which should they begin in this?

Samantha McGolrick 5:54

You're quite right, that it's more Yes, organisations like this, like epicentre of like being able to have such a broader impact on our health, happiness and resilience in society. And I believe that's through improving health, safety and well being outcomes. So yeah, where do boards start? It's really about understanding your influence. There's a few different misconceptions around how the level of influence boards have on outcomes. And that's a particular important thing for boards to get across is that they have a lot of influence on health, safety and well being outcomes. And considering that people are spending over a third of their lives at work, we have this like, real big responsibility and opportunity to invest in understanding more about how they influence health, safety and well being understand the key leavers and just ways that they can make an impact on those outcomes, a positive impact on outcomes, because a lot of the times we don't if we don't recognise our influence, or realise the breadth of our influence, then of course, we might be doing things that are to the detriment of the outcome, right, we might be creating adverse outcomes without even realising it. So where do they start? To me? It's a lot about recognising influence.

Helga Svendsen 7:16

Yeah. And the influence they have on that organisation? Okay, so it's, so what I heard in there was, there was some leavers, two things (a) they need to understand their influence. So I'm wondering if you've got some tips for boards to think about that for them. And secondly, you talked about the leaders that the board can pull around that as well. So I'm wondering if you can explore that as well.

Samantha McGolrick 7:36

So I think, to talk about the influence boards have, I think I want to talk about the one I mentioned three misconceptions that I have found, in my time working with boards. And these misconceptions, I think, prevent board members from stepping more into a leadership role, rather than purely an oversight role. For me, that's the part of leading by example, right? It's not just waiting for things to come to me or being told by the executive, or even asking certain questions, even though I have a program that talks about asking better questions is really important. You know, even though I think that that's important. It's what you say and do in the boardroom as well. It's your behaviour. So I really think it is time for us to look at creating, as you mentioned, in the beginning, places and spaces where people leave work in a better condition than when they arrived. This is called regenerative thinking. And so if we want to create positive outcomes, and make people better, then we need board members to step up. Okay. So what I think there are three misconceptions around why board members are maybe reluctant to step up is firstly, yeah, they don't recognise the breadth of their influence on wellbeing, health and safety outcomes. And I think that might stem a bit from a broader misconception of the board's influence on culture. And culture has a significant influence on outcomes, right. So, for example, I've heard NEDs suggest that the best way to drive culture is through the appointment of a CEO. However, that mindset really separates the decisions made in the boardroom, from outcomes at the sharp end at the front line. So from a well being health and safety perspective, you know, putting the onus on the CEO to improve outcomes makes it perhaps more difficult for board members to recognise how their own behaviour and governance decisions inform the perception of those in the organisation as to the priority placed on well being health and safety. Because boards informed structures and systems that the executive implement as well like it's from what they say what they ask for what you notice and comment on. And so when something goes terribly wrong, and the board then questions why would someone make such a stupid decision? What we're doing at that point is looking down into the organisation to find bad apples and broken parts instead of looking like up and out, it's a frame like a language I like to often use look up and out, to understand the factors that are influencing people's decision making, and importantly, where the board is influencing those structures and systems that perhaps decrease the priority on wellbeing, health and safety. Put it this way, do you think I guess that the culture and the governance at Crown Resorts or Australia Post or Dreamworld would change simply by changing the CEO? Because more than likely not if the CEO is working under those same conditions, the same structures and systems right that that manage the previous CEO, same reward, same incentive sync targets, you know, you might see short term change, but it won't be transformational or systemic, which is why the board place that's such an important role in outcomes. So that's, you know, one of those misconceptions that I think recognising your influence and like we just talked about, there's a question I often get asked when I'm presenting two boards on health and safety, governance, and it was always do we have a safety culture? Now health, safety and well being our outcomes, have a broader organisational culture, you can't separate these things so people won't prioritise health well being and safety if your organization and the climate prioritizes profit at all costs, or if targets make it difficult to prioritise well, being Dreamworld is a good example of this. There's not one thing that led to the issues that dream role, but in terms of the board's role, there are many examples of how dream world's board prioritise profit through what it asked for and measured and commented on. Another misconception. I think that kind of prevents boards from perhaps stepping up into that leadership role that we need is that I think that it might be that there's an incorrect assumption that executives know how to lead well being health and safety. Now, there's a lot of training out there for executives, and there's an expectation that they know what to do. Now, I'm not entirely sure where that that assumption comes from. But for me, it should be fairly clear, given the state we're in now, right? We have one in five people who experience a mental illness, the workplace is now the leading cause of death, given that we've had an arm due to work related stress, organisational injustice, all these things that are leading to mental illness are particularly high levels of work related stress burnout, people are leaving their employers because they're not fulfilled, they want more from life, it should be kind of clear that executives are not necessarily equipped to deal with the complexities involved in leading wellbeing, health and safety. And frankly, there are many executives who are personally struggling with their own mental health issues, because of what perhaps they've had to give up as they climb that corporate ladder. There's actually lots of research that shows that those who have risen to senior positions have sacrificed a lot along the way, like family and romantic relationships, like their support network in the organisation, and outside of it is much weaker because of it. And that support network is really important for us feeling like preventing feelings of loneliness, and it hinders their performance. So they actually found that 70% of first time CEOs found that their loneliness hindered their performance. And others, surveys found me aware, CEOs have a higher average of divorce rate that divorce actually is linked to poor performance as well, and greater risk of loneliness. And if we if we have a correlation between loneliness and performance, it becomes a governance issue. So I think that that's something to with, importantly, why boards need to step up and more talking about those key leavers. It's feeding into the kinds of incentives that we're putting together the targets organisational targets that we set, are they promoting or hindering health and safety? Are we making it difficult for people to prioritize health and safety, when it matters most to do so. I'll talk about another one in a sec. But that third misconception is, for me, probably the biggest one when it comes to safety, health and well being. And it's that it's the fact that we start to measure the absence of failure or the absence of negative events as a measure of success. It's a common theme that I've heard throughout my career, and it was further highlighted when I conducted interviews of directors before I created my online program. But the perception is that if we are not seeing adverse events, like injuries and illnesses, then we have to be doing well. Yeah, all the time. Right. Like, oh, I think we're doing I just heard it the other day, actually. We're doing pretty good. We haven't had many incidents. Yes. Immediately. I know that what the paradigm is of that person, we have annual reports. It's another lever. We're measuring safety by lost time injury frequency rates. That's not a safety measure. So much research out there to say that yet it's still in as an indicator to shareholders and other stakeholders as to how well you're doing at safety. Really injury rates full stop are not great performance measures because again, it perpetuates us to look at the absence of injuries. Lower injuries means we're doing well. And then we're like, flabbergasted when something happens, but that's kind of besides the point, if we want to look at regenerative leadership, how can we say that? Looking at the absence of something, and measuring how we did when, okay, so we've failed here, like we've had an injury happen? And now we're going to try and learn how to be successful from that, why wouldn't we put all our effort into looking at all the ways we create success every day, all the positive capacity in our organisation? And how people from a safety perspective, are juggling and managing safety every day, because you're not having incidents every day and injuries every day? What are they doing? And where are they having to compromise on safety to make ends meet? That's where we want to focus our attention. And quite frankly, that's where the board needs to start asking different questions around that sort of stuff. And not about what happened after the incident or waiting for things to happen, or waiting to even see near misses, what resources to looking at where we're doing things well.

Helga Svendsen 16:12

Oh, so many things on there, like what was in my mind as you were talking about the absence, because the other thing I think that that often prompts is, if an organisation gets very tied up in incidents, for example, they are also meant that sometimes things might get reported, because the organisation, you know, we're seeking to reduce the number of incidents around, you know, whatever back injuries from lifting, or some of the more mental health sides of things like bullying, and so on in the workplace. So people just don't report them. So sometimes, you know, the conversations are found is that when you start to focus on these things, reporting actually goes up. And that's a good thing. It's not a good thing that it's happening. But it's a good thing that you know about it.

Samantha McGolrick 16:58

Yep, absolutely. So if we're, we still have to manage and understand incidents that are happening. Yeah. What do we focus are a lot of our attention is different. And you're making a great point that if our energy is focused on reducing incidents, and but Gosh, if we put targets around that, and say and measure and incentivize people on that, so many examples of where people don't report, I think there was even where we engage contractors. And often we might put a clause in there where they're not allowed to have certain to keep an injury rate at a below a certain level. And when that's written into your contract, and you're paid, based on that your livelihood is coming from them. What do you think the mindsets going to be of that. And there was this example of a man who never reported the contractor injuries in his team that were happening on the client site. And he's now in jail, because he was awarded number of incentives, millions of dollars in incentives for the work he was doing, but injuring people along the way. My husband worked for a company that if they kept their injury frequency rate low enough, they would donate money to a charity mark, like where would the mindset be, then? Don't be the person that yes, is that up? Like, wow, we have to think through that that repercussions. And that's the best role that the board is playing when you're talking about the leavers getting those tools in place and mindset to think about, okay, how is this going to filter down? And I know, people will say that they do a lot of that. But I think there needs to be more, we need tools to help them do that more with health, safety and well being. Because people can say, actually, they did that a lot. But we could look at you know, Wells Fargo Bank and a lot of different where we're not asking better questions to understand how incentives drive behaviour and spending time on it. Like, I don't know what you really are. But I'm looking a lot into how much time does the board have, I think time in the boardroom is probably one of the factors that contributes to how much time they can spend on figuring out these repercussions. And I think that that's something that's a bit of a challenge.

Helga Svendsen 19:08

Yeah. And even ensuring I think, where it's where it's dealt with through the board structures as well like his health and safety, for example, under audit and risk, or is it under people and culture, for example, in terms of the subcommittee's and those sorts of things as well. So who's doing it? Well?

Samantha McGolrick 19:26

I think what does well look like is probably the best thing because it's hard to tell from an annual report, if you're doing it particularly well. There's a lot of feedback on ESG reporting, that shareholders are saying that a lot of what those reports are telling them is what you're doing, not how effective it is. And so that's a place where I want to focus a bit more of my energy in the future is looking at indicators to really represent effectiveness because I will say this, I'll a lot of lead and lag indicators are both important. But there is a very big mindset around, a strong mindset around lag is bad, lag means you're immature, lead is where you need to be. They're both important. They tell a different story, right? The way I teach it is lead indicators will tell you implementation of things. For instance, lag indicators is retrospective, but it tells you if that's effective. And I think this mindset around going to lead indicators and shaming almost lag indicators. Over time, we've come to this point where shareholders are like, Yeah, but are you effective? Stop telling me about all these proactive things you're doing? Is it working? Because I recognise I'm being told that there's an ROI, a big ROI on investment in mental health is like $4, anywhere from four to $7, on ROI on mental health programs, safety is seem to be people work harder for organisations where they feel their safety, that their employer values, their safety, so there is a business case for it. So let's get to telling me if you're effective, so anyways, that's that was a, that was my garden path there.

Helga Svendsen 21:10

Oh, yeah. Oh, gosh, these conversations go so quickly. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Samantha McGolrick 21:21

Yeah. Okay. I think there's some key questions that I'd like board members to ask themselves. Do you see success first of all, as the absence of failure? For example, do you see your executive putting resources into understanding how things go right, instead of just putting resources into understanding how things went wrong when they fail? So safety is a good example of that. But a second question, I'd like you to think about whether you look at outcomes in isolation of the environment or see people's behaviour as a bad decision, instead of a result of the conditions in which they're working conditions. It's like were you having as a board influence on how people perceive priorities, we need more leaders who are systems thinkers, and those who can appreciate that everything is interconnected, and things will emerge and systems that we can't fully appreciate where that's come from? because everything's interconnected. So when looking at patterns of poor behaviour, we want to look to see how the systems and structures are influencing those patterns of behaviour. And for your audience, that's, that's where the board is influencing those things. And fundamentally, I think that third question is like, Am I truly self reflective? For the specific purposes of today? Like, ask yourself, do I question where my assumptions come from? Do I look deeply enough at how I make decisions? Because we, we go through like this a number of unconscious steps to making sense of a situation, that's good for us to understand what people do in the front line, as well as in the boardroom. We take in our values and assumptions and beliefs, and we frame opinions about things. But, you know, we need to be more self reflective to look at Okay, well, how do I come up with those and talk in a boardroom about how we come up with those is a great tool called The Ladder of Inference that walks us through to have more open conversations about that nine courage any board member to use that tool in the boardroom? But you know, be curious, is that kind of self reflectiveness? To be curious, keep a be a lifelong learner. It's really important. Yes.

Helga Svendsen 23:22

It's so important, isn't it? You can't just yeah, just like an organisation can't rest on your laurels. I think board members can't rest on their laurels in the boardroom as well.

Samantha McGolrick 23:31

Hence the importance of your podcast.

Helga Svendsen 23:34

Thank you. Well, then, for people to learn more or explore more and think more and be curious about these things. Is there a resource that you can recommend to the take on board community?

Samantha McGolrick 23:46

Yeah I would love to I have a program called Lead with Heart in the boardroom. So that is a program where I teach board members to about their leadership and governance of culture, systems change, and well being health and safety. So where they have the most influence to drive, as you mentioned, in the beginning, cultivate a culture where people feel they matter, ask better questions, remove excuses, and lead by example. But it's a lot about that foundational knowledge, which I think is really missing, because I can give you a checklist to say, Oh, go and ask these questions. But I always say this. Once your executive says to you, oh, yeah, we got that. Are your health and safety professional? Yeah. All that? No, that's fine. I've got Well, where do you go from there? So for me, it's a big piece around that foundational knowledge. And that's what I offer in that that program as well. But the ladder of inference is out there go. I've got a tool on that, too. That's a great way to have a better conversation about how we make decisions.

Helga Svendsen 24:43

Fantastic. And I'll, I'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes as well, folks. So it'll be in the show notes. And so I say if you're out walking at the moment, and you think that the show notes are going to disappear. As soon as this podcast is over, just go to my website, you'll find all of the show notes to things there. I think you also talked Just before about, you know, regenerative leadership, and I've had a couple of conversations already on take on board around that. So Carol Sanford, who I think I know has already been on. So folks, I'll make sure I'll link to that is also in the show notes. And Trish Hansen also. So I'll put some of those links in the show notes. There's probably some others. So as I think about it afterwards, I might add some more as well. Fantastic. That has been such a useful conversation, Sam thinking about those kind of misconceptions and the tips for board directors to really explore that more deeply. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the take onboard community today.

Samantha McGolrick 25:31

Thanks, Helga. It's been such a pleasure.

Helga Svendsen 29:29

Hi, folks, it's Helga. So today on the podcast, I'm speaking to Sam a goldbrick. About misconceptions that board members need to think through to really maximize health and safety and well being and mental health in the workplace. It's a great conversation. However, you might note there are just a couple of glitches in the audio. Of course, we recorded it via zoom because Sam's in lockdown in Sydney at the moment and I'm located in Melbourne. So yeah, there are a few little glitches in the audio but bear with it because I think the content is fabulous. Now on with the show