



Take on Board

Transcript – Leonore Ryan

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Leonore Ryan about innovation. First, let me tell you about Leonore. Leonore is a non executive director of Western BACE and is also on the boards of two family companies. With a background in science and technology and experience in innovation and entrepreneurship plus company secretarial experience. Leonore brings strong governance skills to a board along with analytical thinking, and how can we make this happen approach? Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast Leonore.

Leonore Ryan 0:32

Thank you Helga.

Helga Svendsen 0:33

So Leonore, before we get into innovation, as always, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about the guests that I've got. So tell me about your upbringing. What lessons did you learn? What did you get up to? And what were the leading influences on you on how you thought and what you did? So, Leonor, before we get into innovation, as always, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about the guests that I've got. So tell me about your upbringing. What lessons did you learn? What did you get up to? And what were the leading influences on on how you thought and what you did?

Leonore Ryan 1:12

So I grew up in a household of scientists. So my father was a research scientist, my mother was an analytical chemist. And so very much exposure to science at the dinner table was our conversation. And my father and my brother in particular had a real interest in in it and computers. And so we had a computer in the house from a very early stage. And so something that I always just really saw as a tool to getting to where I wanted to go. But also, my mother was having this notice on the fridge that said, anything a woman can do, she needs to do twice as well as a man to be considered half as good. Fortunately, this is not difficult. So these were probably the two overriding pieces of my upbringing, I think that in a lot of ways have have made me who I am. The other one probably to add to that was my mother and grandfather actually owned a business together. That also you're seeing that entrepreneurship that being in business being masters of their own destinies, I think is another thing that's factored into all of this and yeah, my approach to the world. I love that side on the fridge that your mom had more than your family had. So that what was the business that wasn't your

grandfather and my mother. So my mother and her father, grandfather, and they had a dress fabrics business so dress fabrics haberdashery knitting wool, in the main street of the suburb that I grew up in.

Helga Svendsen 2:48

Fantastic, so did young Leonore also work in the business?

Leonore Ryan 2:52

So young Leonore was a little young to work in the business at that time, but certainly loved going to the shop, and didn't get employed in things like counting buttons during the stocktake. And to this day, if I walk into the button section of a shop, I have flashbacks to actually counting buttons for pocket money as part of the stocktake. Oh, fabulous.

Helga Svendsen 3:16

I imagined that would have been? I don't know, I've got pictures of that as a fun and colorful environment

Leonore Ryan 3:22

It was, it was great.

Helga Svendsen 3:24

As well as teaching you stop taking and counting buttons, which you never graduated counting the coins or they wouldn't let you post in it.

Leonore Ryan 3:32

I was Yeah, I didn't get to do that. But I would I always wanted to take the shiny ones home. So that wasn't necessarily such a good idea.

Helga Svendsen 3:42

So they left you with the shiny buttons instead. Fair enough. I mean that that sort of background. Yeah. It tells us a lot about how you ended up where you are. And in fact, I said in the introduction

that you're a director, a non executive director of Western BACE. What is Western BACE? Can you tell us what that is? Because it's just its name doesn't really tell us about what it does?

Leonore Ryan 4:05

Yeah, so Western BACE is an organisation that is part incubator part accelerator, part economic development, really for Melbourne's West. So there is a location that is actually in Melton that houses those activities. But activities are actually available to businesses right across the west of Melbourne. And range from workshops to right through the warehouse space. So a business can grow from being an idea through to co working through to having an office through to having a workshop space warehouse space right through to them. The idea is that they were doing so well that commercial rents are then the most appropriate thing for them and they move on to that journey. So really helping businesses in the West stay in the West rather than then moving to other parts. to town, and then therefore keeping the jobs where people are.

Helga Svendsen 5:04

So some of that family background and the entrepreneurship, your role with Western BACE , you know, the experience that you've had on other boards and so on. And surprisingly, that means we're talking about innovation today, because it's, again, part of that thread that's run through what you've done. So innovation is sometimes Well, I think it's sometimes just a bit of a buzzword that gets bounced around, we need to be more innovative, we need an innovative approach to this stuff, we need innovation, why should boards go beyond that balance? and really understand what it's about? And indeed, what is it about what is innovation in your terms?

Leonore Ryan 5:41

So innovation, yeah, often is seen to be kind of the bits of technology together or doing something in a different way that can be true, I think, the way to think about it is, it's a transformation journey. It's, it's actually about change. And you need to really make sure you've got the processes, right, you've got the resources and capability. And you've got the business model, right. And that really starts with actually knowing your customers. And then as being really clear about what you're actually good at, and what you need other people to help you is a learning mindset, people and teamwork, and risk appetite. And what that really means to you. And a lot of things things are true, whether you're a startup, or whether you're a large organization, or whether you're an organization like Western BACE, that that is, you know, facilitating those things for other businesses.

Helga Svendsen 6:44

So there's a board, I mean, you talked about a couple of things there, you know, knowing the customer and the need, knowing what you're good at having a learning mindset, having the right

people in teamwork, and knowing your risk appetite, maybe if we work through them, and then what what board's role is in those things, and how I might know that. So, you know, I'm thinking about knowing your customers and knowing the need, often for boards, you know, that balance between what is operational? And what is governance is always a finely tuned balance. How can boards really get to know that yet stay in the governance space?

Leonore Ryan 7:16

What should they be thinking about? So I think, to start with, as I said, it's about change. So if you're thinking about this, from a change point of view, you need to actually understand, understand the past, wherever you come from, where's the industry come from? What's the background, what's led you to today? And what sorts of things is the customer actually battling with. And I think they're all things that a board can and should be informing itself of, you're not getting into the the operational weeds by actually understanding those things, and then actually creating a vision of the future together. So not actually, it being the role of either the CEO or the board. But actually doing that together and doing that, with that eye on the customer and maybe even involving the customer to some extent, in shaping that, that reaching out to your partner's to your other stakeholders, and actually helping you shape that. And I think, from a board point of view, there's certainly things that could be done to be on that journey. I,

Helga Svendsen 8:30

I recall, I can't recall who this was. But I recall speaking to a board member, I think it was of a superannuation company, but I can't be sure. And they have a kind of American, I guess, in the boardroom, and it's got its name, I can't remember its name, but it represents the customer refer to that that mannequin, which is the persona of the customer regularly and habits sitting in the boardroom and other kind of important stakeholder meetings, to keep them focused on that customer view, which are kind of locked, you know, sitting there, I know, one of the boards that I'm on is the row Women's Hospital. And we often will have in our board meetings, a patient story, which again, keeps us focused on our customer. What's another ways that boards can keep that front of mind for themselves?

Leonore Ryan 9:19

You know, depending on on the organisation, you're in, whether there is a lot of customer feedback, some industries and some organisations, they get a lot of customer feedback, or they're they're constantly kind of pulling customers about their views. I actually think that that's important to surface to the board level, both the good and the bad to see you know what's going on and understand that. I think also just talking to the CEO that having a briefing from the CEO about things that matter to your clients or your members, things that are going on in the organisation, things that are going on in the industry. And then obviously there's kind of the broad Reading, podcasts, webinars, meetups, none of us have all the answers. But I think there are a lot of places to be going

to get more information and then share that information between the board and the CEO have that conversation about how are things looking out there? What's actually important at the moment? What are people struggling with? What are the problems that we could be delivering on?

Helga Svendsen 10:27

Yeah, which probably leads in some way to that next step that you talked about, which is, knowing what you're good at, and where others might be able to help you. for you in your boardroom? How do you define what you're good at and what others might be able to help you with?

Leonore Ryan 10:43

That's interesting. So I think we have quite a range of skills and experience on the board, which is very useful in terms of thinking about that, and the partnerships, we can then go reach through to introduce people to the organisation to be able to leverage the networks and the skills and so forth that we come from. And yeah, we do tend to have the conversation. People feel quite comfortable. I think, too. Oh, yeah. I know, someone or I could introduce you, or have you done this? Yeah. Have you thought about that? And we do have a learning mindset, which, yeah, is one of the key things there that we're really interested in? How can we actually do this better? And what can we do to support our CEO? Yeah, it's a very small organization, there's not a lot of stuff. And so it is a matter of being involved. You know, again, it's not being involved operationally. But you know, being involved with making those decisions and bringing those resources to the business.

Helga Svendsen 11:53

Which also, of course, links to one of the other things you've talked about, which was people and teamwork in there. And, you know, these steps, they all come together to bring about that kind of belief mindset I guess.

Leonore Ryan 12:05

One of the other things is actually psychological safety, that that's, there's actually a lot of research on psychological safety and enabling innovation, and high performing teams. And I think that's something that we do do well that we actually have that culture at the board level, and through the organisations that are putting forward ideas, they're not going to be shut down, they're going to be discussed, if something didn't go, right, we're like, Okay, well, what can we learn from that for next time, rather than people being shut down or being chastised for that it's very much about having a go. And that's a lot of what you see in a lot more of the entrepreneurial businesses, the kind of startup world, it's said to someone the other day, you building the plane on the way down kind of thing? And so you have all the answers, you don't have it. All right, but you do something and you work out, what did we learn from that? What would we do differently next time? So that

experimentation and that culture of trying something and working out? What did we learn? What how would we do this, but not actually shutting it down? Interesting, isn't it?

Helga Svendsen 13:20

Because I think sometimes, sometimes people maybe it's just me, sometimes they I feel like there's this impression in the entrepreneurial world can be quite kind of cutthroat. Whereas, creating that psychological safety and having that culture of failure, which is okay, because it's all part of learning, and it's okay. To fail, it's okay to support each other. It's okay to create that culture of support is really what's going to create that innovation. Does it sometimes feel like there's a tension in that?

Leonore Ryan 13:56

There is very much the mythology of startups, and how they're portrayed in movies or even how they're portrayed in the media. To be honest, that's not my experience, day to day of working with with entrepreneurs or being an entrepreneur. In the startup world, it's actually much more about that learning mindset. It's not even a nice to have it, it's crucial if you're not actually embracing this whole journey as being a learning experience. And you know, not that it's even okay to fail, you will fail. But the key is, did you learn anything from that? And what did you learn from it? And what can you do next time that you would do differently now that you've had that experience? That's actually the key to startups and the key to innovation is embracing that mindset. And indeed, you know,

Helga Svendsen 14:53

Again, it links to the fifth thing you mentioned about risk appetite. My guess is if you're not failing you are kinda of not trying hard enough in a way like you have to push yourself to the edge of some of these things.

Leonore Ryan 15:04

Yeah, very true. And I think risk is really something that it's all about perception. It's how you perceive those risks. And you know, what one person would describe as entrepreneurship, someone else would describe as risk. It's how you go into that, that viewpoint. And that's where I think, yeah, having diverse directors is hugely important and diversity along a whole lot of axes. They're not just gender diversity, which is often the default idea of diversity. And then maybe we think about, oh, well, maybe a cultural background, but even just the type of businesses that people have worked in. If I look at the Western BACE board, yeah, we have people who've worked for local government for many years, we've got people who've never worked for local government, but have had their own startup businesses, perhaps Yeah, we've had people who've worked for big organizations. Yeah, we've had people who are freelancers. And so bringing all of those different sets of experience and views of a business and and views of then therefore risk, your perception of risk is is very different,

depending on what industry you've come from, what size of organization is it government is non government. And so bringing that together, and then having respectful conversations around that, what's really important to being able to move forward in this space.

Helga Svendsen 16:32

Either from your experience in working with boards around this, or your experience in the boardroom? What's your advice to them in defining or examining their risk appetite to ensure that innovation is open to them for their change or transformation?

Leonore Ryan 16:50

So I think it's actually about the purpose, it's about the why, you know, why? Why are you doing this? What are you actually trying to achieve? And then what needs to happen to get there? And if you're looking at it through that lens, that actually makes a really big difference to it? Yes. Depending on the kind of business you're in, you do need to demonstrate some sort of commercial benefits from what you're doing. But yeah, really, the whys is the key piece to answering that question. If you then look at the potential risks, yeah, through that lens. It's a very different stories. And if you would just say, Oh, well, yeah. Anything that involves other warehouse space must be risky. That doesn't necessarily make any sense. It depends. Well, what are you using the warehouse for? What's going in it, how big it is, how much traffic it has, there's a whole lot of other things that go into that. It's important not to just take risks as being kind of as a standard list or something like that, that it's it's very much around your how that fits with actually what you're trying to achieve. Knowing your purpose. Exactly. Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 18:04

Knowing the strategic direction, knowing what you're aiming for, and everything else will fall in behind that to some extent. And I just want to come back to something you said a moment ago about, again, about defining that risk appetite and having those diverse views in the room. It also sometimes makes things harder. What's been your experience around how to keep conversations constructive? Well, I guess how to keep that constructive tension in a group that is diverse.

Leonore Ryan 18:34

So I think being able to explore that, when there are differences, being able to unpack that and being able to say, Well, why do you think that what's Yeah, what's behind that? The classic? You know, can you please help me understand that makes a big difference, if you can actually understand where someone's coming from, and why they have the views that they do, you can then actually start to talk to those factors and and address the the underlying concerns or ideas that are behind that. And

I think that's that and checking your ego at the door, really, that everyone's willing to have a conversation on that level? To my mind are probably the two biggest things. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 19:25

Checking your ego at the door. Yes. Okay. It's a good thing to happen. All the timing these things always goes way too quick. And this one is no exception. So what are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Leonore Ryan 19:43

I think really, where I started that, think about your customers think about what they need, what are their problems? How can you help them solve their problems, rather than inventing something that you want to invent? How can you actually help them solve their problems. And then think about, okay in that, what are you really good at? But where perhaps could you partner with someone else in the part that they're really good at? Absolutely. That learning mindset, if there's one thing to walk away with, it's a learning mindset, being open to always learning new things, trying things out. If it doesn't work, what did I learn from that? And, and having that generosity of spirit with yourself and with other people, that you're not shooting down? The ideas or the, you know, the things that people have tried, but actually supporting that? And that probably brings me Yeah, it's about people. I mean, I think everything's about people when it comes to the end of the day, people working in teams, different risk appetites that people might have different views. And listening to that and learning.

Helga Svendsen 20:53

I agree that number one thing that that's what struck me in this, I think, is that, you know, how do we ensure we stay in a constructive space? It's a learning mindset. How do we constructively talk about risk appetite, have a learning mindset? How do you know your customers have a learning mindset? It really does feel like a foundation, because it is all about people. If you can get that right mindset coming to it, we're much more likely to be able to bring it together. And is there a resource you would like to share with the take onboard community?

Leonore Ryan 21:24

Yes, so this is a bit, perhaps left field for boards, but I actually think it would be a good thing all left field is great. So it's a book called "The Lean Startup" by Eric Rees. And really, it talks a lot about that, what he refers to as a build, measure, learn, feedback loop. So you try something, you then measure what happens when you try it. And then what did you learn from that? And then you build the next one, so forth. I think there's actually a lot of really good concepts in that book that would be interesting for boards to contemplate.

Helga Svendsen 22:06

Fntastic I will make sure there is a link to that in the show notes so people can have a look at it. Do you happen to know if it comes as an audio book as well as a book book?

Leonore Ryan 22:16

I don't know. I have a paper version. But I would imagine that it would come as an audio book. I'd be very surprised if it didn't.

Helga Svendsen 22:23

I'm increasingly listening to audiobooks these days, probably from listening to so many podcasts. I've gotten used to consuming information in that way, which I never used to do. But anyway, it's I guess that's about the elasticity the brain as well. It just starts to do things differently. Thank you, Leonore, that has been just a fantastic I think innovation where I won four board members because like I say, innovation is bandied around quite a lot. Yet not always well understood what it's about or what board members need to think about in terms of having that innovative mindset. So thank you so much for sharing your considerable wisdom and experience with the take onboard community today. It's been fabulous to have you here.

Leonore Ryan 23:07

It's been my absolute pleasure.