



## Take on Board

# Transcript – Cris Parker

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Cris Parker, about the free service that The Ethics Centre runs called Ethic-call. I saw something about it recently on social media and reached out as I thought this is a fabulous service for board members. And I wanted to know more. So here we are. First, let me tell you about Cris. Cris has worked at The Ethics Centre for 10 years and heads up two of their initiatives, the ethics Alliance, and The Banking and Finance Oath. She is also an ethics counsellor for their free ethics Counselling Service ethical. Welcome to the Take On Board podcast, Cris.

Cris Parker 0:36

Thanks so much Helga, thank you for having me.

Helga Svendsen 0:39

Ah, look, like I said in the intro, when I saw this service, I just thought, what an amazingly valuable service and I posted about it in the Facebook group and know that there was some people there that have actually used the service as well, so I cannot wait to find out more. However, before we find out more, as always, I would like to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Cris, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Cris Parker 1:08

Ah, yes. Okay. So Young Cris is someone who like to challenge and buck the system, getting expelled from high school, curious, always quite into sort of social justice or fairness anyway, a bit too much, my mother would say, and I love to learn. So it's a combination of that that makes me go through, I was a performer. I had a theatre company in Manhattan for 10 years for a company but in Manhattan, 10 years of film company in Australia, I have a psychology degree, I ended up at The Ethics Center 10 years ago, working on the ethics of asylum seeking, and I have stayed ever since. And I have a really strong passion for ethics and, and helping people make better decisions.

Helga Svendsen 2:00

Oh, my God, there is already so much to dig into there. What a marvellously diverse background. That is just fabulous. You sitting there, that you're interested in social justice came from an early age. And I think you said something like maybe a bit too much, according to your mother. But where did that come from?

Cris Parker 2:19

I really don't know, I think I was privileged to grow up in a, you know, fairly affluent environment. And I just saw inequality in places. And it just, it just didn't feel right to me, I suppose at the time, not that there was anything wrong with that. There's no judgment to be made whatsoever. But it was just a lack of fairness that I was saying. And I think it may have been because I came from an immigrant family. My parents worked very hard as professionals to provide that life for me. So it wasn't easy. Perhaps, then that's, you know, maybe where it came from.

Helga Svendsen 3:00

Interesting. So tell me about Ethi-call, like I say, I saw something on social media Tell me what is the service? And how my board members use the service?

Cris Parker 3:10

Well, the service is amazing. It's been around for 30 years, actually. And we've just recently had to revamp, but I suppose but get some more counsellors on board. Because demand was increasing. And actually, that was before COVID. So it was very opportune, that we went through this process, because the demand now is very, very high. And I think that is because we've gone into a stage for such a long period of uncertainty, and it does create a fatigue in decision making. So you know, you're making decisions about whether you can take your children to see your parents, things that you've never had to think about before. So I think that's partially that fatigue is weighing heavy, but also I think the issue is that, you know, you might have gone out with with a group of friends, you know, once a month and just let it all out and, and soundboard, you know, issues that you're having, and that's gone through lockdown as well. So I thought I don't think there's as much of an outlet for people to discuss those dilemmas that they have. So Ethi-call itself is an absolute privilege for me as a counsellor, and I really mean that from the bottom of my heart. It's a service where we're trained counsellors, and we use a series of questions that provide a support and guidance, I suppose for individuals that are stuck in limbo situation. And the most important part of it, is there's absolutely no judgement. We're not there to moralize. We're not there to tell you what is right and what is wrong. That is completely stripped away. And I suppose part of that job through this socratic method of questioning is to try and just put some of the heat on the side just put the emotional a little on the side so that there's more clarity around the actual facts that you're dealing with. And so you know, you've got an hour to do it, it's free, you have an opportunity to listen to these people that are genuinely stuck. And the thing is that we can't underestimate the suffering. And I know that's a big word. But when you're in a true ethical dilemma, and you're stuck, it's binary, and you

think you've only got you know this or this that you can do, you do stay awake at night, you do feel sick in the stomach, it does impact your relationships at home, it does impact the way you work, it impacts your decision making in other areas. So we can't underestimate that, I don't think and so when you go through this process, you know, you don't always get to a decision at the end. But what you do get is a sense of relief almost from people that you're speaking to, and a clarity so that they feel like, okay, I've got choices. Now I understand the values that are clashing and creating this tension. Now I can start to prioritize what's important to me. Yeah, that's pretty special.

Helga Svendsen 6:14

What are the sorts of challenges or dilemmas that you hear from board members?

Cris Parker 6:20

Well, I have to stop right there and just say, professional, so this is this is a private conversation. Yes, this is not something that I can attribute to any particular person. And that's a really important part of this process. I mean, we do have supervision once a month, where we can talk about some issues we may have had, but again, we never attribute it to someone. It's more just to improve our service. So there are people that contact the service for professional reasons. To be honest, the majority of them are personal reasons. But that's not to say, a board member doesn't have a personal issue. Yes. And I think the interesting thing about the ethical process is that it is a real insight into decision making, and what needs to be undertaken in that course, to provide really reflective considered decisions and understanding your own defaults and whatnot in that way. So you know, professional questions can be anything, particularly around vaccinations around reputation, and the competing duties and obligations that one have. Just recently, I've looked at this case study where Accenture, hired by Facebook, to monitor the noxious online activity that happens that AI can't pick up. And, you know, this was a half a billion dollar client for Accenture. And the new CEO walked in and said, well, what's the risk aspect here? Because employees were suffering, because of the work that they were doing emotionally, you know, you know, depression, anxiety, insomnia, you know, really terrible suffering. So what are the trade offs around this sort of diamond client that pays you half a billion dollars a year, and the impact it's having on your employees? And what does that look like? That's just an example that's in the public sphere. But it's those kind of trade offs, I think that board members particularly have to navigate. Now, as a board member, your responsibility, of course, is to the organisation and you've got organisational purpose values and principles. But as an individual in that place, you do have blind spots, because your own personal values. So undertaking something like a process, like Ethi-call, even from a personal perspective, allows you to unearth those blind spots and where they may be and how you may be potentially bring those to the boardroom. Yes,

Helga Svendsen 8:58

I was going to ask about that as well, because you know, boards are made up of individuals. So we all have our own individual kind of frame on things, but it is also collective decision making as well. And

not that everybody has to agree it doesn't need to be consensus decision making, but it is collective decision making that we are all bound by in the end. So if the board makes a decision, that wasn't my personal decision, I am still bound by that.

Cris Parker 9:24

Yeah, no, I suppose one of the the interesting things are as a board member or as a part of any community, decision making body, whatever that is, is what do you do if your personal values and principles don't align with those of the organisation? And if you're pulled one way or the other, and how do you how do you make that decision? That would be difficult, I would imagine.

Helga Svendsen 9:50

So, you know, I would love to hear what the process or the framework is that you take people through. And if it's helpful, I'm wondering whether you I mentioned earlier about vaccinations. And I know that it is something that lots of boards are wrestling with at the moment. Do we mandate vaccinations within our organisation? Or even just how do we approach vaccinations, it's become a bit of a political hot potato in some circles, you know, whether it should or shouldn't be, maybe that's part of it. I don't know that, if it's helpful, whether we use that as a frame for what the process and framework would be for approaching it.

Cris Parker 10:29

I'm really happy to go through the process. I'm not sure that using vaccinations as a case study, let's say, to go through that process is, is effective, because I think there's no one decision that's going to fit all organisations and your decisions depend on the organization's purpose, values and principles. And I think you've seen Alan Joyce come out with Qantas in that situation, where he could make a mandating decision, because it did aligns so strongly with the organisation's value of safety. So for Alan Joyce, to me, Well, my personal opinion, a very sensible and valid line to draw. But that may be different for different organisations. So I don't feel comfortable using that as a one Oh, but it's, you know, going through the process will allow your listeners to go Okay, well, let's think of my own organisation's values and principles and purpose, and how does that align, potentially, because there is a parallel between dealing with an individual ethical dilemma and the board dealing with an ethical dilemma, there is a similarity in the process. But then a recognition of the collective culture and character of a board is that is another layer. So the process itself is when it when, you know, when I when I have a colour, it's very much about Okay, tell me the situation. And this is I suppose, when you think of a board, these are the papers, this is your board papers, they've come up, here is the situation. And I think, then, as a counsellor, I would clarify facts and challenge assumptions. And I think that that can be parallel very much to that idea of what is beyond the scope of the board papers, you know, as well. And that's an important aspect, then the next part of the call is very much around, well, what else is involved in this decision that you need to make who's going to be impacted by this decision, again, from a board's perspective, and opportunity to look at all of the

stakeholders involved, and not just the immediate ones. But if we look at something like human rights, and modern slavery, we're looking at, you know, stakeholders down a supply chain, and that's done quite extensively. And we do that in this in our model as well, who's going to be impacted by your decision, and we push that boundary to do that, and that then allows an understanding of consequences and an understanding and an open stores to process? What would it look like? If have we thought about that stakeholder? Have we thought about that stakeholders, so in a sense, that's a really good way to, and then the next stage, you know, as a counsellor, would then be looking at, actually, this is a good stage, it's a small, but vital stage of just making sure everyone's on the same page with your caller and be able to speak back to them and say, Have I got this right? And that's their opportunity to say, Well, no, actually, it's this this'll This, again, that would translate to a board, being mindful that groupthink is not what you want. You don't want consensus, necessarily, that's certainly not the outcome. It is the outcome you're striving for, but not at the expense of open end civil debate. So then the next point is to ask the caller, all right, what is some of the ethical influence that you know, from an ethics perspective? What are the contextual influences on this? So this might be looking at family or community cultural expectations? It might be looking at religious or spiritual beliefs, and how are they impacting how you feel? If it's an organizational conversation about an organisational dilemma? What are the codes in place? Are there? Are there regulations in place? So there? Are there any precedents that have been set? I think that's the opportunity from a board perspective to sit and say, Okay, what, what is the organization's purpose and values and principles, and all three are needed to make that ethical framework so that, you know, there is a deep understanding of what that is, and I don't think we can talk about that enough. Because ethics is very contextual and things being fit for purpose is very much around reflecting on current days and current expectations and community expectations particularly and reputations and messaging and all of that stuff that just changes all the time. Look at now if you read you know like today, you know News Corp. is now going to start programming material that recognizes climate change, which is quite a shift for them. And that's very much around losing advertising dollars and reputation, and it works in reverse. So it's a really interesting dynamic. So then once you've done that, then, you know, you get a really strong picture of everything at play. And then, for me comes sort of the really exciting part, which is where you put the philosophical lenses, I suppose, and being mindful not to speak in any kind of philosophical jargon too much, because you don't want to scare people off this process. Because it's really valuable. And that's where you look at your duties, and your obligations and your rights, then, and then you might look at outcomes. So you know, deontology, you know, and then consequentialism, then then you might look at,

Helga Svendsen 16:00

Hang on, I just, I just have to butt in there because I'm blissfully ignorant. What is deontology?

Cris Parker 16:06

Oh, it's very much about duties about you. Thank you. That's what I made that sorry. That's why I made that's why don't use those words. We got people thinking, what does that mean? what they're thinking, What am I doing? When you do speak to a call? It's amazing how many times you will ask

something like that. And it's not been thought about? And it really opens up? Yes, it opens up a completely different perspective, I suppose in a sense, you know, the process is about introducing different perspectives, so that the cola can just get outside that, that mindset and give them opportunities to think of new options, not me, it's not my job, it's that, you know, I'm just there to help them do that. And then you might look at 30, sets their character, and that's very much around, you know, if you were being the best person you could be what would that you know, what that look like? What is it that you really do value strongly? What principles guide you? And again, going back to the board? If you haven't done that work, personally, and I, you know, again, I'm far from one to moralize. But in my experience in speaking with senior leaders, it's those leaders that really do that work to understand a purpose, but more importantly, your values. And that's what one considers good. You know, what is this organization considered good. But that's not enough, because good intentions are not enough to reach your purpose, you've then got to understand what are your principles? What are the guiding behaviours that you're willing to undertake to achieve? What is good, and again, if you go back to those different ways of thinking, if outcomes are important to you, and that is your sole purpose, and you your outcome to what is good, if you're not monitoring the way you achieve that, that's where you start to bend rules, where you start to behave in ways that are, I'm thinking potentially, because you're focusing so strongly on what you know, is good, and the outcome that you want, which is, you know, this is what have good people end up doing things they're not happy about. So you go through these lenses with these individuals, and then you care ethics as well, so very much around our relationships playing a strong role. And again, from a board perspective, there's that idea of if you've been working with this supplier for years and years and years, so you have this really wonderful trusting relationship, so much so that you're not questioning who they're working with, and what third parties they're dealing with and who they're transacting with. And is that a blind spot? Yeah, it's sort of like that. And then when you get to that point, with the core, by that point, it's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. And they've thrown options out because of, you know, opening up ways of thinking, and you're kind of jotting those down, we don't keep the notes. Once you get to the end of that you're like, Okay, so let's have a look at some of the options. This is what you've said, and you sort of can put those out. And then when they might say something, you know, I'm able to say, Well, you did say that you value this. So how does that bind with that option. And so you start to play around with it like that. And then I think the most important part of at that point is that if they feel if you're lucky enough, or they're lucky enough to come to an actual solution, then it's like, great. But even if they can't come to a complete solution, and they've got some options, then it's about Alright, how do we act on these? That's really important. So then there's ideas of Do you need peer support, they may have a little homework to do around some policies they're unaware of or legal aspects they're in they need to find out about so they might Go on, say, Yep, I'll do that homework, they come back, and then say, Okay, is there a plan B, if that's not going to work sweet sort of, you know, brainstorm that. And then the very final point, I highly recommend that boards or anyone making decisions do is there's some tests that you can go through the most easily accessible. One is the sunlight test, which is, you know, front of the AFR test or whatever you want to call that. If your decision was on the front cover of the AFR, whatever, would you be comfortable with this decision? And I think the important part of this, and I really feel strongly about this, it's not would people who are reading it, be comfortable with your decision? It's, would you be comfortable with your decision? Because you're the one that's going to have to be accountable for that? Yes. And if we monitor and adjust our decisions for the public, are we staying true to our ethical framework, I think that's where we can start to find ourselves where ethical fading can come

into play. And we start to find ourselves making decisions that aren't in line with what we said, we were. And then when you start doing that, as an organization, I think then you start to risk, lacking integrity, you start to risk losing your integrity. And that's the point too, and I said, you know, to call us off, and the point is, when you come to this decision, not everyone's going to like it. And the ethics centre is, you know, we'll get well, that's unethical. If you can say, actually, it's not, we've told you who we are, we've told you out what we value and how we're going to achieve our purpose. And this is very much in line. And that's again, going back to Alan Joyce, we've told you that safety is our number one priority. vaccinations are in line with that number one priority. And that if you don't like that, I'm sorry. But we haven't pulled this out of nowhere with this sort of been our value all along. Yeah. So you go through those tests at the end with a colour they another test might be Could this be a universal rule? So you've made this decision in this situation, if this decision, and again, this is good for boards? If If this decision were to be done in a different jurisdiction, would it still apply? And if it doesn't apply in that jurisdiction, then you question yourself, why? And if it's a cultural reason, and that's understandable, then that potentially would justify. But if it's not a cultural really reason, it's something different, then maybe you have to go back to the drawing board again, a bit, you know, so that's a really interesting test. So that's the process. And then at the end of the hour,

Helga Svendsen 22:50

Oh, my God, you do all of that in an hour? That is incredible. Sorry, go on.

Cris Parker 22:55

That's the hard part half the time, you know, the objectivity. Sometimes you want to jump in and go, Oh, you should? And you don't, you know, really being able to say to yourself, no judgment, no judgment. And the other thing is having to say to them, okay, I've got to move on now, because I really want you to get through this whole process. Anyway, I'm sorry, is a no, no, no. Oh, no,

Helga Svendsen 23:21

I love it. And so what I love in it, that there was, you know, the steps in there, I it makes it clear for me how it all works. But what was also interesting in there, as you were talking it through is I was reflecting on those steps could easily be part of the process that a board collectively also goes through in considering an issue, you know, consider the situation, what are the facts, challenge assumptions, who else is involved, even that reflective process reflecting back that we're all on the same page? Sometimes that happens, but it doesn't always and it's really useful in a group for that to happen, you know, thinking about the different influences and context, different perspectives, the test, all of those things, I think, are really useful, because often I think what happens is, and presumably it's the same with individuals, they leap straight to options, and then become overwhelmed with what to do, because we haven't done those exploratory phases to help inform what the right options are.

Cris Parker 24:21

Yes. And I think, you know, like your comment said, well, you do all of that in an hour. I think that's what's true. It's true. You have to make time for these conversations. I think it's really important.

Helga Svendsen 24:34

Yes, yeah. In the context of a board meeting, for example, or in the context of a, even a strategy day or a board conversation, actually an hour's not that much, and being able to have that time to really, you know, these presumably the questions and the challenges and the dilemmas that come to you other things that are as you said earlier, keeping people awake at night and making them feel sick and now has nothing really to help sort those sorts of challenges out. In fact, it's magic, that it can help to sort those things out for you for ethical, it's individuals, and often individuals will be feeling sick about this or, you know, staying awake at night. But more broadly, how can we encourage an ethical lens in the boardroom? It's not always an overt thing that is considered and it should be. So how can we encourage that in the boardroom collectively, that ethics is front of mind?

Cris Parker 25:30

Well, I think discussion around what is the ethical framework that the organization has developed and if they haven't that's worthy of discussion and time. So that's your purpose and your values and your principles. I think that that's really, really vital. And recognizing that, essentially, ethics is choice. ethics is a doing word, and it is about decisions, and it is about choices. So being mindful that when a decision has to be made, you're doing ethics, and consideration and reflection needs to be a part of that process. I think that's important. I mean, there are artifacts that can be developed around ethics, which I think are good things to do that keep it front in mind,

Helga Svendsen 26:19

Cris, this has been such a fabulous conversation. We haven't touched on the ethics Alliance, or The Banking and Finance Oath. But I think we're just going to have to come back for a conversation another day about that, because this has been gold. So what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today? Well,

Cris Parker 26:38

Helga, I would say that using Ethi-call, and you can access that at the ethics Centre website, [ethics.org.au](http://ethics.org.au), one hour free conversation. Using Ethi-call does many things, it's a process that helps you understand the values that drive your behaviour, in a certain situation. it alleviates conscious, but potentially subconscious pain or thoughts or, or baggage, you know, that's not a great word that



can impact your choices and your decisions in other parts of your life. And every decision we make informs our next one. So clarity around how and why we're making decisions, I think it's a really important thing to have and to relieve suffering. For anybody that's having difficulty in a decision. Save that hour, it's 730 to 930. At night. It's Monday to Saturday, it's like a really good hour.

Helga Svendsen 27:44

Oh my god, it is incredible. I was going to ask you for a resource for the take on board community. But I think we know what that is. It is the the ethical service itself, and you'd said the website before, I will also make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. So people can find it easily.

Cris Parker 28:03

Can I add one more resource that I think really may be helpful. For board members, if you go to the ethics Center's website, there's a resource that we have called "Ethics in the boardroom". It's a paper that we did with AICD. And it's a really, really useful resource around a lot of the stuff that we've talked about today.

Helga Svendsen 28:26

Fantastic, you most definitely can add that to the list. And again, I will put a link to that specific resource in the show notes so people can easily find it, because I think that would be fabulous. Cris, thank you, thank you for taking the call when I just got in touch cold with the organization and said, Oh, I would love to have a conversation about this. You might need to put on additional counsellors, I'm guessing because I'm guessing as people now know that the service exists, you might get a few more calls from board members and folks are really encouraged you to do so there are the boardroom is all about those decisions that keep us awake at night. It is all about you know, difficult decisions. So having this service as a place to, to share that and have somebody walk beside you as you try to wrestle with that. I think he's incredibly valuable. So thank you for explaining it to us today. Thank you for the service that you run, and for sharing your wisdom with the take onboard community today.

Cris Parker 29:21

Thank you. Thanks so much for having me.