

Take on Board podcast - Llewellyn Prain

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

board, board meeting, boards, llewellyn, people, boardroom, board members, organization, thinking, disability, conversation, bit, chair, questions, build, feel, brene brown, meeting, afraid, community

SPEAKERS

Llewellyn Prain, Helga Svendsen

# Helga Svendsen 00:07

H

Welcome to the Take on Board podcast where we talk all things boards and governance. I'm your host, Helga Svendsen. I know that being on a board can be interesting, valuable and exciting. Yet it can also be lonely, challenging, and really hard. Here at take on board will bring you weekly tips, tricks and advice to help you navigate your way onto your first or your next board. And to help you build your governance wisdom. It's your community of trusted advisors who talk to women who've been there, done that, and together, we'll discover what we need to take to be our best. First, let me tell you about the fabulous Llewellyn Prain. Llewellyn is currently a board member at Western Water, the Victorian Eye and Ear hospital, the Public Transport Ombudsman, and the Disability Services Board. And she's previously been a Board member of Western Regional Health Center and Co Health. She's worked as a lawyer in senior strategy and policy roles and she's run her own business. Her zone of genius is in helping to develop and communicate policy in a range of areas including emergency management, health, and transport. Llewellyn was the first woman to Chair the Board of the Western Region Health Centre. And she helped to lead the merger process that created CoHealth, one of the largest community health organizations in Australia. She completed the Williamson Community Leadership

Program in 2017. Llewellyn lost most most of her vision in 2014, through a hereditary eye condition. She's passionate about addressing inequity in our community, and ensuring

diversity and inclusion in all aspects of life. For all of these reasons, I know you're going to love my discussion with Llewellyn today. Hi Llewellyn, welcome to the Take on Board podcast.

# Llewellyn Prain 02:03

L

Hello, Helga? Thank you for having me. And congratulations on the podcast.

# Helga Svendsen 02:08

H

Thank you. So great to have you here. Tell me a bit more about who you are.

# Llewellyn Prain 02:13

L

Yeah, it's funny when you hear your bio and sort of go, "ooh, I don't know if that's really me". But that's, you know, that's who we project in the world. One thing that isn't in the bio, is that I have a fairly major vision impairment. So I get around with the white cane, and I can't see very much. And this is relatively recent. So this happened to me about five years ago. So I've been a director without a disability, but I've also been a director with a disability, and having a disability has opened up huge, new, huge new sense of possibility for me, which is not always what we hear about disability, sometimes saying is such a negative thing. But it's been transformative, it's been really important. And I'm glad that I can bring that different perspective to the work that I do, and hopefully make change for others. And, you know,

# Helga Svendsen 03:17

H

We know from all of the evidence around boards, or groups or organization, the diversity makes for stronger decision and makes for better decision making. So the value you must add to those organizations is incredible.

# Llewellyn Prain 03:31

L

It is interesting, you can still have groupthink on a board, even like when you, you know, with someone with a disability on there. I think groupthink is a little bit endemic on board sometimes. But I actually quite like you know, being different and bringing that to the board table. And it's always a fine balance about how you do that. But it's been an interesting journey.

# Helga Svendsen 03:55

H

So tell me more about that. In terms of the governance side of things and boards that you've worked with? What makes a high performing board

# Llewellyn Prain 04:04

L

I've been thinking about this a bit. So I've obviously been on a few Boards. But also when I was an exec, I reported to quite a few boards. So I have observed a number of boards over the years. And what does make a high performing board and and how do we measure it? I think it's something that's very difficult to measure. But if you think the role of the board is performance, "how do we make this organization the absolute best it can be and take it in a direction where it will thrive and do the most good?" is sort of how I think about performance. And that's around real clarity between the leadership on the board and in the management team about you know, where are we going? How are we getting there?

So that's the sort of strategy piece. But of course, any board has a massive piece of compliance work that it must do. Particularly government boards, all boards need to keep an eye on compliance or what sometimes called conformance. So if you think of performance, you know, how do we drive this organization be better, but conformance how do we make sure we're keeping the lights on everyone safe everything? We're complying with everything that we need to be complying with? And in both instances, it does come down to, are we asking the right questions? Are we getting the right information that they're critical for both performance and conformance? performance and performance? This is a handy framework for me to think about, what is the job that we're here to do? And how much time are we spending on each one? And are we getting the balance, right? Because if you ignore one, it's to the detriment of the organization. So that's how I think about it. And I'm, I'm thinking about boards as being maybe assertive or passive. Sometimes, I think, less high performing boards can be passive and reactive, they sort of wait for management, to tell them what's happening next. And when you see a really assertive board, I think you really say that has the ability is not good enough. And I think particularly in the lot of, you know, recent royal commissions and things like that passivity can be a real trap. And it can sort of drain energy. And when you're on a high performing board, the energy in the room is high. When you make the clarity of what you're trying to achieve is clear, clarity is clear. But you know, there's clarity, there's real conversations about what we're trying to achieve. And there's a partnership approach between a robust partnership between management and the board. In terms of, you know, these are the issues that we're facing, this is where we want to get to, here the options, we were giving ourselves plenty of time and regard to think through what they are. And when you got that going on on a board, I do think it performs better than when the boards kind of waiting to hear what management tells that next, which some boards are like that. And you know, sometimes it's game playing, sometimes it's it can feel passive

aggressive, even. So I think that task of getting everyone on the same page, and really old feeling like you're moving in the same direction, and that sort of robust collaboration and collegiality is what, for me makes a high performing board. You know, that robustness and keeping that robustness in the boardroom and encouraging courageous questions, and so on. How does that happen? How does that magic happen? How do we get there? So trust. So I think boards that boards that think about how they're doing their job, in a meaningful way, is one step in this structured ways to do that through various reflection processes or other other ways to do that. But I think the higher the trust in the boardroom, the more likely that people are going to feel comfortable to say what they're really thinking.

Because a lot of people don't actually say what they're really thinking in board meetings, believe it or not, and it can be it can feel like there's a pressure to just go along, and not disrupt and not cause a problem. And you know, we all want to be liked, and we all want to fit in. And I think boards can get into real trouble when, one, we let sort of that one person always do it. And we and nobody sort of comes in behind to support them. Or Nobody does it. I certainly been on boards where it's been me, and nobody supports me in the meeting. But people support me outside the meeting, which not that helpful. Because obviously nothing changes if nobody else is prepared to pipe up in the meeting. And you know, sometimes you're an outlier, sometimes your view is completely different to everybody else's. But the beauty of Board is if you bring lots of different perspectives, it flushes things to the surface, and it spreads the horizon of the thinking. And that's when when there's more possibility in the thinking, I think we're able to work towards better solutions together, then the sort of same old, same old, I think sometimes, sometimes it can feel like you're going through the motions, because you know, there's a similarity to the structure of each meeting. And if you feel like you're going through the motions of building your Board meetings, that I would encourage you to reflect why and and what what perhaps you could do about it.

# Helga Svendsen 09:37

H

Has there been a time when you felt that when you've been in your board meeting, you're feeling like you're going through the motions? And there's something to say? What did you do about it? If you can say,

# Llewellyn Prain 09:45

L

as an imperfect human being, sometimes I didn't say anything about it, because it's too hard. Or it's just you feel that maybe it'll be a brick wall or framing questions, really important skill for a board member. And I only really developed that skill by asking questions.

# Helga Svendsen 10:03

H

So what do you mean by a framing question, what does that look like?

# Llewellyn Prain 10:06

L

Well, sometimes I might read my papers and be sort of troubled by something. And or you might think about something for a long time. And then I might spend quite a bit of time thinking, how is the best way to frame this, so that I get my point across, I'm influencing other board members to my point. And it's going to either get the answer or the conversation that's going to progress it or I'm going to, you know, be able to satisfy myself, but you don't always get that right. And sometimes, I'm many times I've thought I should have asked that question better, or that, you know, that that didn't actually get the conversation to where I wanted it to. And you know, that's just a work in progress of developing these skills around that stuff. You know, one thing I'm working on at the moment, because now I sit in board meetings, I can't see the papers, and I can't read really read the papers in the board meeting. And my comfort zone is detail, you know, that is my comfort zone as a human being detail. And so I can't, I can't do that in the board meeting any at all. So I'm used to being uncomfortable in board meetings just for that physical fact. So one of the things I'm working on is to, you know, he's still going to be across the detail, but get less tied up in it, and try and think big picture and, and try to make those big picture contributions, because I feel like that's, that's now where I can add more value than then trying to engage with detail that I can't see it, you know, during the meeting,

# Helga Svendsen 11:41

H

There you go. There's one of those ways in which having a disability helps you get into that kind of big picture thinking.

# Llewellyn Prain 11:47

L

Absolutely.

# Helga Svendsen 11:48

H

So it's a common thing I hear from some of my clients that they particularly when they've been working in executive roles, and then moving to a non executive role, that exact change from being a across all of the detail and the operational side, to having to think strategically and in a governance sense in the boardroom. What some ways that helps

people to stay in that strategic space?

# Llewellyn Prain 12:11

L

For me, this might not work for everybody. But for me, I do think not being afraid to be a disruptor not being afraid to try and position. And that doesn't mean being when you being a disruptor It doesn't mean being antagonistic, but not being afraid to say, "Well, I'm concerned that we haven't thought about x y z, or here's a different way of thinking about it". Or, you know, have we missed the point completely here. I think about framing the question and the about ways to communicate those sorts of concerns in in ways that are palatable, but meaningful to people around you. It's hard, and it's a skill and you need to understand your organization, you need to understand how it works. What it's called culture is and you know, its operating environment, its challenges. So you actually sort of need to build up to get to be picture doesn't just sort of come spontaneously. And I don't know, I think sometimes Boards think well, we can we can just be spontaneously strategic and big picture, it doesn't actually happen that way comes with time. So sometimes, to me, it's around in terms of big picture, it's actually going to the core of why are we here? And what are we trying to achieve? And coming back to that, because a lot of technical stuff gets discussed on boards endlessly. There's a lot of procurement stuff, there's a lot of technical stuff that's fairly dry. And I think if you can keep coming back to why are we here? What are we trying to achieve, how we trying to achieve it as guiding principles.

And you know, think about your own values, I've got very strong values around equity. So

trying to bring that in, helps get you into that big picture thingking rather than the technical detail around a tender process or, or something like that, which you still need to be able to do because it's your duty to do that. You need to make decisions in the best interest of the organization every time. But getting that balance and bringing back to values. And why are we here that, you know, the existential question to the organization can help you think about that stuff.

# Helga Svendsen 14:24

H

I'm involved in a tender or procurement process at the moment on one of my boards, and have reminded the organization about the Victorian Government social procurement policies and bringing that into the process. Because it is not just about who's the cheapest, who's the best who's got the different people around the table - it's thinking bigger picture. So I love those questions about what are we really here to do? Where are we at now? How are we going to get there? And what's the bigger picture about what we're doing? Love it. You've talked about values, you just mentioned there about keep bringing your values into the boardroom. Tell me what are your key venues? And how do you bring them into the boardroom?

# Llewellyn Prain 15:05

L

Well, I'm a Brene Brown devotee, and so she says have two values, which is sort of like goodness, only two, it does help you sort of clarify what you're focusing on whenever you're doing anything, really. So my key values of courage and equity. And that means that I'm probably more likely than than the average bear to pipe up about if I I'm I'm worried about where things are going, or you know, what the overall, you know, what is our reason for being, I will pipe up about that. But I'm also interested in, you know, diversity and inclusion and feel a responsibility as a person in a leadership role with a disability. To bring that to the board table. In terms of Disability Employment, we have a huge amount of inequity in our country around disability employment, and that's largely about attitudes. So trying to make sure that that's covered, you know, in any work or strategy, or that you've got a really robust disability action plan that includes some of those sort of imperatives is something that I'm not afraid to bring to the board table. And I also recognize, sometimes it's raising stuff in board meetings can feel like support here, sometimes. So stuff actually gets done outside of board meetings, you setting principles and direction and, and making decisions in board meetings, but stuff gets done outside of meeting. So it's worth having conversations with fellow members of your board and your executive team about some of those things, to make sure they actually happen.

# Helga Svendsen 16:45

H

It's a great point that influence within the boardroom, but getting influence within the boardroom can sometimes happen outside the boardroom, how does that work for you? How do you engage with your co directors outside the boardroom, or members of the exec outside the boardroom,

# Llewellyn Prain 17:00

L

I think you have to make sure that you're being very respectful around to your chair, and also to CEO. So making sure you're not just talking to anyone about anything, but making getting some alignment there to start with. If you've got your own things that you want to talk about, and you know, sometimes it's just we, we can do x, we can't do y. But that's fine. It's it's all about having the conversation. But I think getting to know your board members, your fellow board members, where they're coming from who they are, as people helps build that trust. And it helps people be more courageous in the board room. And that just leads to interesting and better conversations, I think. And if people are ready to pipe up and not feel like everyone's going to think I'm a dill if I asked that or people are going to think I'm arcing up again, if I ask that, you know, these are all judgments all the time about how you do these things. And I usually reflect after every board meeting, I think that was okay. Or I could have done that differently. You know, that I'm sorry, I

digress. But I do think anytime that you can spend, either in structured ways or informally getting to know, board members is really important. I also have a practice of like whenever somebody new is appointed to the Board of emailing them and welcoming them and congratulating them so that they feel welcome to the organization, because it can be daunting to come into a group that sort of formed. And so that's something I try and do, trying to build those relationships at the beach, because you're going to disagree with each other from time to time. And that's perfectly fine. But it's about understanding each other on a human level and relating on that human level that can help the magic happen. .

# Helga Svendsen 18:44

H

Absolutely. It's interesting, I've heard of different chairs and boards, sometimes who really encouraged that engagement outside the boardroom. And sometimes don't. I'm a big supporter of it, I'm always up for having cups of tea with people outside the boardroom for those exact reasons, building the relationship, that helps to have those from the conversations,

# Llewellyn Prain 19:03

L

boards can become factionalised really easily. So you do have to sort of keep an eye on those things. So that's where it's important to sort of be meeting with everybody.

# Helga Svendsen 19:12

H

You said it was a digression, or I want to go down your digression path. You talked about reflection after board meetings, and you're reflecting on what went well, and what you might have done differently. Do you do that as a formal reflection afterwards? Or is it informal? How does it work?

# Llewellyn Prain 19:27

L

Probably informal, or just be thinking. I'm an introvert. So I'm not you know, you have people with different styles. And you have people who will talk more, you have people who talk less, and I'm quite conscious that I'm one of the people who talk less and so you sort of going, I don't know, maybe it's the lawyer in me, like, you know, payment per word or, you know, you pay in 10 minutes or whatever, of output. So, you know, because the most powerful thing you can do an a board meeting is speak. But as an introvert, I think I probably say less. But try and make sure, when I speak, it's of value. And that's not always the case, you know, because I'm a human being. But, you know, reflect on that, or, you

know, it's also thinking it's also you're learning about, wow, that was such a great question. I wish I had thought of that, or I really learned from that person about the way they came at that issue, or those sorts of things, I think just helped build up your practice. I would not go to a board meeting without doing a bit of reflection, probably just on the train home. You know, just thinking about it.

# Helga Svendsen 20:34

H

It's a great thing to do, though. It's a great reminder, I think I probably do it informally sometimes. But it's a excellent reminder for me to maybe incorporate that into my practice a bit more. So thank you. Again, you just mentioned great questions. And you've talked about some of them already. What are some of your favorite questions that you've either used yourself or that you've heard from others?

# Llewellyn Prain 20:53

L

Good question. I seen a Board meeting last week where someone asked me, I thought that's a great question. So it was where, you know, you get the same reporting each month, and you don't necessarily get a trend line, you know, but someone had gone back and said, Well, you know, for the last seven months, we've been told the same thing, what actually changed, we want better performance in this area. And so, you know, they've gone away and done that sort of analytics on the on the data over seven months, or whatever. But it just led to this completely different conversation of, you know, information that we hadn't actually had. I weren't aware of this was in the compliance area. And so thinking of sort of performance conformance. So this is in sort of conformance box. But that's such a great question of digging underneath, and what's actually going on here, and that's so much part of your job is sort of digging in underneath, and trying to work out what's actually going on in the organization and kind of flushing that out in the board room. And, you know, I really think that's been borne out by the recent banking Royal Commission of you know, that clearly just not happening enough. So, when you see that happening, you go here, great job. And I think some of the other in terms of the big picture questions, they can just be harder, and might come out more in conversation. But sometimes it might be around just being really clear about what the outcome is of a particular theme, or getting everyone clear about where we're at. One of the things I sometimes do, which not necessarily a question, but sometimes I not sure what's going on with the people. And I'm really conscious of it, because I can't see the body language anymore. So I'm often asking, how do they look? You know, are they looking unhappy, but I can tell when people are fidgeting or seem distracted, I do pick up on that quite a bit now. And so it's sometimes Boards kind of forget that we're human beings were sort of driving for these outcomes. And like, are we actually all on the same page here? I think we

really got to checking with people about what are we doing here, how we relating as human beings, this is this, okay? Exec teams are all highly paid and professional and all the rest of it. And we've got, you know, high expectations, but with people, and so just doing the human thing. And checking in, I think is quite an important thing for boards to do. Because, you know, you want to all feel like you're rowing in the same boat in the same direction,

# Helga Svendsen 23:31

H

often as part of the chairs role to really bring that together and bring the people together in this. What are some of the things that you've seen from the chair to make that that sort of things work really well?

# Llewellyn Prain 23:43

L

Yeah, I think it's so tought to be a Chair, because you sort of got so many things you're remembering to do in the board meeting, and I think board members can help chairs more than they do to go, you know, like, I sometimes feel like you have this sort of, it can become a familial, the chairs looking after all of that, and I don't have to step up, you know, whereas I mean, I'm quite happy to go, Well, we need to remember blah, blah, or, or, you know, just help the chair out. Like they've got a range of things that they've got to be dealing with during any Board meeting. So you can only do that with the Chair that that doesn't feel disrespectful, obviously, like, you need to have a good relationship with that Chair. But I sometimes feel like we you know, you can be in a board meeting and everyone's sort of just waiting for the chair to deal with the conversation rather than how am I helping us get there? How am I helping our chair, help us get there, but look, great chairs bring energy, they bring vision, and they bring clarity, and they help articulate that. And you know, no Chair is perfect as no human being is perfect. But I think you learn something at each meeting from a chair, is when you know, you've got a great chair.

# Helga Svendsen 24:53

H

I love that idea of all of the board helping out the chair, like the chair, they're just first among equals, they're not any special powers. Well, sometimes they do actually. But they don't necessarily have any special powers about it, they just another member of the board, and having other board members help them adding that and bring things along. I love it.

# Llewellyn Prain 25:12

L

You know, sometimes it feels like you know, you're waiting for mom and or dad to kind of get everything under control. That's why we're all we're all leaders here. And it's tiring if they've got to do that, you know, every difficult discussion.

# Helga Svendsen 25:26

H

So for them? Absolutely. They're the ones that are trying to hold it all together.

# Llewellyn Prain 25:30

L

time constraints and all the rest of it. So I kind of think, make it a bit easier for the future. It's tough.

# Helga Svendsen 25:38

H

We've covered a lot today around way boards can work well and balancing different parts of it out our roles as individuals on the board and also working within that team on the board and engaging with other members of the team. Just thinking about what we've talked about today and somehow bringing that together. If you were writing a letter back young Llewellyn, what would you advise her? What would you advise her to take on board?

# Llewellyn Prain 26:05

L

worry less, although I say that to you know, current Llewellyn. It's kind of my lifelong challenge to worry less, back yourself more. And we don't know what's going to happen to us in this life. Just back yourself and go for it because life's short. And we don't know what's going to happen to us. So no regrets

# Helga Svendsen 26:29

H

A resource to share with the community? Can you recommend a resource, it can be a book, a TED talk, podcast, anything,

# Llewellyn Prain 26:37

L

So, I think I mentioned I like Brene Brown. So you know, little bit white middle class, not going to be everybody's cup of tea. But she's done some great books around vulnerability. And I think when you're not afraid to show who you really are, and show you vulnerable side is when you can have them impact because that's when you're getting true

connection with other people. And you can make a bigger impact. And the more we see that in our boardrooms, I think the better they will be. So the Power of Vulnerability by Brene Brown. And she's also her most recent book, Dare to Lead, I think it's got a lot of good strategies in organizations about, you know, having, having tricky conversations, having tough conversations and having, you know, being brave and bring yourself to the table and being how to have them.

# Helga Svendsen 27:30

H

See, now I want to go down that digression. Being vulnerable in the boardroom. Tell me about that.

# Llewellyn Prain 27:37

L

Yeah, it's a funny one. So I've worked on vulnerability a lot. Since losing my vision, I'm so much more vulnerable all the time. Now, like if I'm out and about in the world, that it sort of makes it easier to be more emotionally vulnerable. And that's just not being afraid to show who you really are and what you really care about, and not be worried if you're going to be judged about that. And people might not agree with you. But that's okay. It's about showing up and showing who you are. And being comfortable with that. And I think you know, all leadership is kind of taking that step forward and showing who you are, and not being afraid is is a critical bit of leadership.

# Helga Svendsen 28:20

H

So from our conversation today, I wonder if you can suggest two or three actions for a community to take on board.

# Llewellyn Prain 28:30

L

My first one would be around thinking about how you can build trust in the boardroom. So we've talked about the coffee theme outside, but one of my Boards recently did this sort of role play thing, which we were all sort of mortified about. But it's actually slightly shifted the dynamic and sort of brought us all a bit closer together, I think it's been a really good thing. So I think some formal, non traditional ways of bonding can be really good. So the first ones around, asked, How are you helping to build trust? What suggestions are you making around you? What are you personally doing to build trust with your fellow board members? The next one would be around challenging yourself to be brave in the boardroom, whatever that means for you. And maybe it's, I'm going to set myself a KPI that I'm going to ask 10 questions at this board meeting, I'm going to be really talking a

lot this board meeting, maybe it's that that's what's broke for you, I don't know, whatever it is, but just give yourself a manageable goal around how to do it and, and try it on. You know, don't be afraid to experiment and be brave and, and push yourself. Because that's where you get the growth and you know, you're showing a different side of yourself to your board members, which will also you know, hopefully help to build trust as well if if you do it thoughtfully and well. Do I need a third? Is that enough? Okay, yeah, that will probably do.

# Helga Svendsen 29:55

H

Fabulous. Okay. So, build trust and be brave. Nice place to close it out. Thank you. Thanks for being with us on the podcast today. And I look forward to hearing from the community about what their thoughts are about what you shared with us.

# Llewellyn Prain 30:11

L

Thanks again for having me here. It's been an absolute pleasure.