



Take on Board

Transcript – Ingrid Svendsen

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Ingrid Svendsen about communicating in a crisis. Ingrid is the co-founder and chair of the East Timor Hearts Fund, and she's also the past president of the Darebin Parklands Association. Her first board was the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance Victorian Branch Counsellor. Ingrid is a crisis communication professional who is specialized in the age, disability and health sectors for around 10 years. She's the co-owner of Grounded Communications and an AICD trained non-executive director. She has an adult son and lives in Melbourne with her partner and two chickens. And if I could also add she's got two awesome sisters, one of whom is behind the microphone today. So I know Ingrid is going to share a whole lot of wisdom with us today about crisis communications, and how we can handle things whether it's a pandemic or not. So welcome to the take on board podcasting grid.

Ingrid Svendsen 0:54

Thank you. lovely to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:56

Does feel slightly unusual having my sister on the podcast If that wasn't entirely clear from the, from the introduction for others, Ingrid is my sister. But she also knows awesome amounts about these things. So I thought, well, why wouldn't I have her on the show? So Ingrid, as you know, I normally start the podcast by exploring a bit more about the person and for you. Even though I know some of this, tell me about your upbringing. What lessons did you learn? What did you get up to? And what were the leading influences on how your thought and what you did?

Ingrid Svendsen 1:28

Yeah, well, look, I think like a lot of people, probably leading influences were my parents. And probably one of the earliest influences I had, in terms of learning the lesson that community action is important and that you can advocate to change where you find something's not right. Probably the earliest lesson I learned was when I started in prep, and there was a overcrowded School of old fashioned school room is 70 children in it. And there was, you know, quite a lot of most of parents and my parents were Part of those parents who are leading the call for change there to get something done about those class sizes. By banding together with the parents Association and writing directly to the Minister, I still got copies of these hilarious old fashioned letters on my dad to

try and get something done about that. And they were successful. Ultimately, a brand new school was built, which we all went to.

Helga Svendsen 2:21

Obviously, we share our parents and it's certainly been one of the influences on my life is that community activism and making a difference, I think was probably drummed into us from very small children.

Ingrid Svendsen 2:31

Yeah, absolutely. Our parents were involved in you know, everything the town fair, that Progress Association, I set up a food Co Op or part of a food Co Op very ahead of their time. They even set up a learning Co Op, which was our random school, staffed by people who might teach us so it was quite interesting experiment. But you know, they're involved in the community if they supported the community and certainly what we what we were instilled with his children.

Helga Svendsen 2:57

And we can see that in what you've been involved in as well. Whether it's Darebin Parklands Association, or now the East Timor Hearts Foundation that you co founded and another chair of, which leads us to part of what you do now, this crisis communications, and it's often in the health industry or the aged care industry. And obviously, we are in the middle of a global pandemic. Just to be clear, we are recording this on Friday, the third of April, even though it'll probably go to air in a few weeks time. And obviously, this pandemic is moving swiftly. So if there's anything we refer to, around the pandemic itself, just be aware that it was recorded on the third of April. So Ingrid, lots of organisations are now thinking about how to best communicate, given they have now unexpectedly for many of them in the middle of a crisis. So while this is a pandemic, I'm sure some of the way organisations should communicate, no crisis is the same no matter what. So where should we start? What are the things that boards should be thinking about in terms of crisis communication,

Ingrid Svendsen 4:01

Well, one important disclaimer just before I launch into it is that Grounded Communications, you know, we take the confidentiality of the client work we do extremely seriously. So I don't talk about the work that we do in any specific detail. But for the purposes of this very happy to talk about, you know, de identified type cases and some of the case studies with a no names basis that we've been involved in. So yeah, look, as you point out it, it doesn't matter whether it's a pandemic, whether it's a natural disaster, you know, what it is the principles of communicating in a process are exactly the same. The actions that the board need to take well ahead of the process are exactly the same. So I'll definitely say that, you know, in the middle of a crisis is not the best time to start contemplating, do

we have a crisis communications plan, that's work that should be done or questions that should be asked well ahead of whatever it is the earthquake or flood or the bushfire or the pandemic striking? So for boards, I would say there are a few key things that boards can do this is to, you know, make sure that you do have some sort of a strategy in place. And perhaps if you're, you know, like some of the organisations that I deal with a smaller NGOs, perhaps you don't have the capacity to bring in the expertise to develop across this communications plan, but at least have the discussion and make sure that people understand what crosses could be And generally, what sort of response you would launch into, should that happen. So yet, make sure you have a strategy across this communications plan to make sure it's fit for purpose and has been tested ideally. So I could give you a few examples of plans that I've seen that clients have had done with I sometimes spent a lot of money, getting a plan developed that, unfortunately, really gives them a false sense of security. I've seen plans that my clients have had developed where there's no definition of a crisis. So if things start to go pear shaped, you No one would be in a position to definitively even say, you know, is this or is this? Is this not a crisis? I've seen so called crisis communications plans that only focus on media. So they're obsessed with media risk, that have nothing of substance in them to do with stakeholders, which are often the key issues. Or say crisis communications plan. were randomly the chair of the board is up there on the crisis communications response team, which is completely inappropriate from a governance point of view. So yeah, so if you do have a plan, just make sure it's been developed with someone who has the appropriate expertise to do that work. And ideally, make sure it's tested on a regular basis. So it's impractical, scenario based work. I would also say the clear roles and responsibilities are very important. So the board needs to know when to step in and when to step back. It's certainly not the board's role to be sitting on that crisis communications response team to the CEO will brief up to the board if necessary. in most circumstances, it's not the board's role to plan the operation response. But it is the board's role to oversee risk. That's an absolutely fundamental responsibility of the board. So it's the board's role to to make sure that the overall approaches is sound, to ensure that there are systems in place to deal with operational risks. So that, you know, ideally, these things don't happen in the first place. And in some limited circumstances, the board may have to from issue, it's uncommon, but it does happen. I can talk about some of those examples in a bit further detail.

Helga Svendsen 7:39

I want to hook back on a couple of things there. So you've talked about a strategy and having, you know, some of the sorts of things that should be in there. And obviously bringing in some sort of crisis communications professional to help with that, or somebody internally who might be able to do that. What are the sorts of headings that should be in that crisis communications plan, what should it look like?

Ingrid Svendsen 8:03

They can differ according to the size and complexity of the organisation, so, larger organisations, you know, would have something that's a little more extensive smaller organisations might have something that's, you know, fairly brief a definition of what across it is, and some trigger points. So,

you know, infectious disease is not necessarily a process. But if you've got X number of cases in X number of the facilities that you run, that's the trigger for saying yes, that could be a communications class. So definition and some trigger points. Ideally, you should have stakeholders across the stakeholders listed so you can sort of hit the ground running there. The crisis communications response team should be set out so who sits on that both your internal expertise and your external expertise. So typically, the CEO of the organisation would share that all their delegate, you would have your other senior executive is relevant. And you might bring in all those subject specialists as relevant. So if you're dealing with a major data breach, bring in your, you know, your head of it, or if you're dealing with a major financial issue, bring in perhaps your auditors or your head of Finance. So they will also set out the external expertise certain needs to be on that crisis communications response group. So that could be your lawyers as they auditors could be external communications support, which is often really helpful just to have someone who's a little bit step back from it. I think that the best crisis communications plans are extremely practical. And what they aim to do is reasonable to you to hit the ground running very quickly in a process. So they will have resources in their life as I say the stakeholder analysis so you can know who you need to speak to. They will have resources in their assumptions, template responses, so you know what you need to say, in a process and if you can, they will stage that you might have your initial tart responses. And then you're more, you're more full and Frank responses you will have set out in their spokespeople. Those are a few other components definition. So, you know, across the seas triggers. So you know, when it is stakeholder, say, you know, he had to speak to angry responses. So you've got at least some sort of ability to hit the ground running in terms of what you're going to say.

Helga Svendsen 10:24

Fantastic. Thank you that is so useful for people. You'd also mentioned about testing it. How do you do that? How do you test across this communications plan?

Ingrid Svendsen 10:32

Well, we do for example, and different people do different things, but we, for example, do scenario based testing with our clients. So we'll pull out the plan. We'll put a few real life scenarios we'll get people to go through using the process communications plan they'll need to decide is this process. So who we need on our prices team? What are we saying in response to What would we be doing in response? What are the tactics that we need to be engaging in in response to this? So we will, we'll haul it out and we'll test it. And through that process, we will find if there were any weaknesses, we've got the entire executive teams, I will I think this is more I don't think it is a crisis. We've highlighted there that, you know, it's not clear enough what the definition is. So we do it that way. Other people do much more extensive, you know, days long testing, where they will do a real time or semi real time type scenario with an unfolding set of circumstances that people are responding to, you know, that can be really useful to be a bigger organisation special, really just depends. Even just a more bad plan out once a year and look through it and just make sure that all of the contacts are in there. Maybe a lawyer is going out of business and you've got a redundant lawyer listed in there, you know, that sort of thing. There are some other preparedness things that

people can do also media training can be really useful for your CEO typically and a deputy. So you've got someone in the back pocket should you need them, or for your content experts such as you know, in this pandemic type scenario, the Chief Medical Officer of your organisation, if you've got all your chief, clinical officer or whoever, all the other topic experts or support, you know, deputies that might need to speak, you know, process, you'd referred before about that roles and responsibilities. And I think it's particularly important, I guess, for boards to think about that, as you'd said, What is the role of the board? What is the role of the organisation? And you said, you had some examples for us? Can you take us through some examples that might help boards to think about roles and responsibilities and what's useful for them to think about their risks, obviously, a key responsibility of the board. So it's the board's role to be sure that proper system is in place to respond to a process should occur, but it's not always the board's role to front end I found that there are probably two responses amongst our community DNS CEOs across communications practitioner. But I find there are a couple of responses from chairs of the board, they either want to be all over the issue, or they want to run a mile. And in different situations, neither of those is appropriate, always. But sometimes it is appropriate for the chair to front the issue. For example, if it's a major governance issue that we're dealing with, if it's an issue with, you know, there simply is no CEO because the CEO is perhaps at the centre of some sort of misconduct and the chair has had to step in, where it's an issue that goes, you know, strongly to the values of the organisation, where it's an issue where it's a major strategic decision of the organisation that is the centre of the issue, and you simply want to share that. So the unity of organisation, if you think back to about 10 years ago, when David Jones the department store had its major crisis. So David Jones, it's A large number of its stopping young women positions itself strongly as you know, fashion to women, but its CEO, it was revealed in being serially sexually harassing young women, subordinate employees. So in that situation, the Chair of the Board and the board has to take a strong role the CEOs gone. And the organisation has to explain this horrendous failure of culture and values.

Helga Svendsen 14:26

Is there any other examples that would be helpful in thinking about roles and responsibilities for boards?

Ingrid Svendsen 14:31

I've got a favourite and this is a bit weird. People might think it's a bit morbid, but I actually keep the obituary of this chair of the board amongst my files that sits on my desk and I refer to quite often. This goes back to 1982 when Johnson and Johnson had the Tylenol poisoning issue, and it's been described as the perfect crisis communications response and for good reason. The chairman of the company, James Burke, was the person who is in charge of that deciding what to how to respond to that issue where cyanide laced capsules of Tylenol painkiller had been placed on shelves. And a number of people, including children had died. Company Chairman James boot didn't go to share price or anything like that. He considered that the organisation had a moral responsibility. And he went back to the founding created the organisation, which was to serve society beyond sales and profit. So he launched a very strong response that was based really around protecting people first

and foremost, and saving the product and protecting the company's reputation. So I'd really encourage people to just Google that and have a look at some of those examples. But there was a swift and really solid operational response. You know, production halted the product withdrawn, really quickly new tamper proof packaging launched, that an amazing homes response when you think that this was 1982. So this is the year of the telegraph. machine. Probably prefects, I'm not sure. But some very sophisticated techniques, such as a free call number to consumers, which is, you know, standard stock but a free call number for media so you can get the robo quotes and updates, which is pretty, you know, cutting edge for its time. They reportedly set up a live satellite feed to get the message out. He didn't absolute media blitz, he did 60 minutes and Phil Donahue taping yourself back media conferences from the company's headquarters. So there was no kind of hiding. And it was all just great messaging, you know, very contrived, very action oriented as to what they were doing. The company reportedly even offered financial assistance and counseling to the victims, you know, and even though they would fault they're a victim themselves. So it's not for any bad reason that that response is seen as a showpiece in how to respond to a process. So I look to that often as an example of a board chair, showing incredible leadership in a process

Helga Svendsen 16:58

And it just shows How important that I don't know having a values based response to these things. It's not all about quelling the potential legal action or making the things go away, but actually just about having the right response to it. And again, for boards in thinking about this, what is the role of values and ethics in establishing these plans and having a response?

Ingrid Svendsen 17:23

There's really no point talking about how your greatest concern is for your employees and having annual customers and having these fancy statements on your website, if they mean nothing when things hit the fan. So it ought to be the absolute cornerstone of all of your communications but particularly in a process that's when people really see what you're made of. So if you say you care about the customer, first and foremost, and that your staff are the most important thing to you well, during a crisis it's time to show it so

Helga Svendsen 17:58

We've talked about Tylenol and how that was a really fabulous response by the board and a very genuine and, and values based kind of response. Have you got any examples on the other side where they've got it wrong?

Ingrid Svendsen 18:11

Yes, in Dreamworld in October 2016, four people died horrifically, you know, some of some of their own children had no function that dream was world, at least all the response delivered by both the CEO of the parent company and the chair of the board. And in some ways, that's fine. That's it. That's good that the board and the CEO showing that unity and accountability in a timely process, that's fine. But you can just see that that example is just littered with examples of board failure, right from the start in the board's failure to oversee risk and ensure that there were proper safety systems in place, but also in the delivery of that cross communications response. So only a couple of days after the horrific tragedy, the board decided that it must go ahead with the ad They said they had a statutory obligation but no surely you could have opened that meeting and then just immediately closed visible, you know, voted to declare it and closed it at the AGM they failed to defer avoiding the CEOs bonus and, and then only belatedly and after outcry decided to, you know, try and donate it to the Red Cross, the board failed to make sound decisions over the reopening timeframe. So, the theme park was still a crime scene. And victims had not even bury their loved ones when three days later they decided they were going to reopen a theme park as a tribute. And of course, you know, as I say, that was just those foundational issues at the board sky illiteracy risk and ensure that proper safety regimes replace such as training and maintenance and all of those things. In February 2020, in fact, the car and I handed down the findings on that case, and the current you know, just noted that you know, the rudimentary safety systems the frighteningly unsophisticated safety Poor record keeping and something that you know, every board director should probably note that the coroner stated that such a culpable culture can exist only when leadership from the board down a careless in respect of safety that cannot be allowed. And the current a has now on referred that metaphor of potential criminal prosecution. So that's something that every board director should take note of, during the dream old case, the evidence was laid out the multiple breakdowns of this machine over multiple years. So that's something that the board certainly could have known about something that certainly could have come before the board in regular reporting the fact that that this machine had a history of failure, and that the maintenance systems were in place.

Helga Svendsen 20:52

It's a incredibly sobering example of when organisations don't get it right and boards don't get it right. What the impact of can be I know your organisation, you've dealt with some of the faith based organisations and in particularly in the consideration, I guess or contemplation around joining the redress scheme. Is there any examples from that that might kind of showcase the values of an organisation coming through in this crisis comes environment?

Ingrid Svendsen 21:21

Yeah, definitely. We dealt with one some years ago. If this was a faith based organisation in the sort of social services sector, I guess you'd say. The organisation have been approached by a couple of people who had said that they had experienced abuse in orphanages that were owned by

predecessor organisations to this organisation. These predecessor organisations that ran these orphanages didn't even exist anymore. But this faith based organisation decided that in keeping with its organisational values that it was going to take responsibility for it. So it launched a major redress scheme. To offer support to those those victims and launched a huge communications campaign to identify further people that might have been affected and to get them to come forward to receive support and assistance. Also, I guess some people could have seen that as potentially harming the organisation's reputation. But it was very much motive in the end for that response within its community. So I think it was a great example of an organisation act in a way that's consistent with values, and ultimately, coming out stronger for it.

Helga Svendsen 22:33

And I guess in thinking about it, I don't know about you, but I feel like I've got emails from every single organisation I've ever subscribed to recently giving me their COVID-19 response. And even though some of those organisations aren't in crisis, they are still communicating in a crisis. So you know, just yesterday, I had an email from an organisation lifting their prices on something with no explanation around what they were doing. No kind of acknowledgment that they were doing this in the middle of a pandemic. And when I responded to them, and asked, you know, if they might not be able to hold off on this for six months, given we're in a global recession was kind of brushed off around that. So I think it's also interesting for organisations not just to think about communicating the crisis itself, but how they do all of their communications in a crisis. Have you got any advice for organisations in that regard about what they should be thinking about?

Ingrid Svendsen 23:28

That's really interesting. You say that because I had a discussion with a not for profit just this week, that was very resolute that it did not want to do any communication on the COVID crisis, even though it was having a major impact on the organisation's operations. So organisation was quite firm that wanted to say nothing and just launch into its regular fundraising campaign as usual, which is completely their role response. People aren't silly and they know it's going to happen. And they'll be quite forgiving if you're honest with them and tell them what's going on. But they won't be forgiving if you're deceptive and tricky, which is what people would perceive that to be an organisation, which is into a fundraising campaign at the same time as its head to pull a number of its operations because of COVID. So I would say, you know, to just be honest and upfront, and ultimately, you will benefit from that as an organisation. Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 24:26

Yeah. That's what I tried to communicate back to this organisation. But it's fair to say back and forth hasn't been too fruitful on that one. I might need to send them your way. Ingrid. We've covered an enormous amount today about communicating in across this, which again, is a key thing for boards

to think about. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Ingrid Svendsen 24:47

Well definitely say to people, you know, don't be paralyzed by fear or by false confidence. As a board member, you have a responsibility to act and it's never too late to start looking at your prospects. Communications preparedness. So you have a lead up to ask a few key questions about your state of preparedness when you're a big organisation or small organisations, so some of the things you can do is perhaps ask the CEO to provide a briefing at your next board meeting when you've processed communications plan. And when the CEO does there are some questions who developed it? What's their expertise? When was it last updated? Have key people received training in how to use that plan? And take a look at some questions to potentially about some of the other preparedness that's in places to see or receive media training recently. Do you have systems in place for logging and being on communications and reputational issues? And if the answer is no, or none, or not likely can't really remember to any of those questions. I think that's a red flag for you as a director, and that's your notification that you should do. Doing something on there in terms of giving some direction to the CEO to remedy those sorts of things

Helga Svendsen 26:05

In the board deciding or not deciding in the board, having those conversations around their role and the role of the organisation in the crisis or in the crisis communications plan. What's your advice to boards in that what's the key thing they should be thinking about it about whether it's in their bailiwick or not?

Ingrid Svendsen 26:25

In terms of preparedness, it's clearly the board's role. Risk is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of board directors. So making sure that there is adequate process communications preparedness measures in place, clearly your responsibility as a board director, in terms of process communications response, it really depends on the nature of the issue. And what you're dealing with. There. If you're dealing with a major governance issue, if you're dealing with an issue that involves the CEO themselves, dealing with an issue, the first the culture of the organisation, if you're dealing with With an issue that goes to a major strategic decision of the organisation, those are things where they may be the joint or singular role for the board and the chair of the board to be involved in the planning and the delivery of process communications. But otherwise, I would say buy out the CEOs role to manage operational issues such as that and briefer if necessary. And sometimes there simply isn't any time. So you've delegated management of the organisation to the CEO. So let them do their thing. And they will let you know, you know, even what is needed in terms of the response.

Helga Svendsen 27:38

Thank you for joining us today. It's been incredibly useful, I think, to hear some of those tips about what the board should and shouldn't be thinking about in a crisis, whether it's the current global pandemic or something else. So thank you so much for joining me on the take on board podcast today.

Ingrid Svendsen 27:53

It's been a pleasure.