



Take on Board

Transcript – Rhonda Brighton-Hall

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Rhonda Brighton-Hall about culture, diversity change and what makes a good chair. Rhonda is a director of Making Work Absolutely Human. And she writes and speaks for the Australian Institute of Company Directors. In fact, I heard her speak at the recent AICD Governance Summit and couldn't get near her afterwards because there was so many people surrounding her wanting to ask questions, so I sent her a tweet. And she very kindly agreed to join us here on the podcast and share her wisdom. She is a former board member of the Australian Institute of Human Resources, and she currently chairs the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee. She's also a former chair of Flex Careers and a former board member of Aussie Home Loans and Feel the Magic. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Rhonda.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 0:50

Thank you so much, and it's lovely to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:53

It's great. And I'm so pleased that I sent you that tweet afterwards so you could come along. It's just fantastic. I know. You're gonna have to share with people today. So before we get into culture and diversity and all those fabulous topics, but I'm really looking forward to exploring. Can you tell us a little bit more about you? Tell us about your upbringing and the lessons that you learned what you got up to when those leading influences on you.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 1:17

As a child? Yeah, I think I love starting there. I love starting there more than it tell us about your career. Because I think there's so much of us that grows from our childhood. I grew up in a family whose historically have been farmers for many generations. And I think that's part of it, apart from the fact that I always get up really early, which is in the genes. But apart from that, it also is a very practical and pragmatic sort of way of looking at the world. And I think that's been an important part of who I am and still am. The other part of it is as a child, I grew up in Wollongong, so I grew up in a normal town. And my father passed away when I was only eight. And so I grew up in a quite a single parent family with a Mum, for a number of years before my mother remarried, but in that time, I think I grew up in quite a space where we didn't have all the gender schemas and we didn't have all the way of looking at things. So, I think that that's probably the two big influences in my life have

been this almost matriarchal view as to very stoic and serious grandmother's and I had a mother who looked after everything and so that was that matriarchal side to me. And then there was this pragmatism of farming and, and sort of growing up in an environment where you just get over yourself and get on with it. I think that's so now i am i'm not a very, very rarely do I see or participate in drama.

Helga Svendsen 2:40

You know, both of those things, get over it and get on with it and don't participate in the drama is already advice for board members.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 2:47

I think that's true. So keep your eye on the ball and where you can add value where you can do things that are practical and helpful, as opposed to getting caught up in things that go in circles.

Helga Svendsen 2:56

And it's so interesting reflecting on that childhood and the sounds of things, kind of like a strong mother in that. I hear it so often from women who are on this podcast about those strong women that were in their lives from an early age and often it's their mother. It's it's a common theme by the sounds of things.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 3:13

Yeah, I actually I wrote a blog a few years ago 2017 that went really brilliantly everywhere. And it was just an open letter to my daughters. And it was just saying things like, you know, gender schemas for somebody else, just ignore them. Yes.

Helga Svendsen 3:26

When in thinking about children and dealing with children, it's those attributes in them when they're children about being strong willed and doing things outside the box, and all of those things that drive you completely nuts as a parent, but they are the exact skills that you really value with them when they become an adult. So the more frustrating they are as a child, the more amazing they will be as an adult.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 3:51

Very, very true.

Helga Svendsen 3:53

So even today, we want to talk about culture, about diversity change, what makes a good chair, there are so many things in there that are important for boards. So let's start with culture. Culture is certainly more and more on the agenda for boards to think about, and particularly since the financial services Royal Commission, and I think boards are really grappling with that and what they should be doing and what their role in culture is. What have you learned? And what's your advice to boards, given your work in this area and working with boards globally?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 4:28

I'm really quite optimistic around the current state of boards understanding of culture because I'm seeing more and more very traditional directors, traditional chairs, asking much more thoughtful questions. Now, even if you go back about five years or so, I've been living overseas for a number of years in the Netherlands and in the US. And when I came back, I was quite surprised that the way Australian boards tend to look at culture and it's in all little pieces of a jigsaw, but not really bring them together. And so you sort of sit in the boardroom. Here's the presentation on diversity. And that takes 20 minutes, because very efficient. And then you have another day, 20 minutes on talent. And that's very interesting. And they have 20 minutes on the engagement scores. And so all these little staccato pieces of a jigsaw never really come together. And yet they are hugely important to each other. And it's only when you see all the pieces together, that you can start to really understand culture. And so I think that that's only just started to happen, as we've got boards and some of its been driven by fear. I mean, you and I've talked before about that financial services. Royal Commission really opened people's eyes and said, this is actually how impactful culture can be. And we really need better ways of looking at it, understanding it, measuring it, mapping it, whatever you want to call it, so that we do have genuine insights at the board level and we can actually take some oversight overseeing role as to the culture of an organisation how powerful it can be.

Helga Svendsen 5:57

So for boards, what have you seen from both directors that really works well in that measuring and mapping of culture, because often we will hear about the culture survey. Yet I think there is so much more to really measuring and mapping culture than that. What should boards be on the lookout for?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 6:15

I think what we need to start with is just to put the engagement scores, which is normally what people boards are looking at in their place, because they are a product of the 1990s, where the people side, the human capital side, whatever you want to call it, a business was driven by productivity and business cases, that was the birth of Lean Six Sigma and all these things. And inside that, well, how can we get people to be important, we'll measure them. And so the only thing that engagement actually correlates to today is productivity. And so that's one measure of a culture. It's not the only one you're going to need. And so there was a commission taught us that most of the companies, if not all, actually, I think was all of the companies that witnessed that Royal Commission had an engagement score above 82%. So that tells us that it tells us nothing much about culture, it just is an interesting number. When you're looking for a board and what they should be looking for, you need some understanding of how people are lined up together, like, are they on the same page with your purpose? They are on the same page with how you want to treat clients and culture? Do they set the same expectations about how they treat each other? It's a much more distributed or democratic way of looking at the relationships in the business than just what is the guy at the top or the woman at the top saying, it's actually what are people actually treating each other? And how are they coming together? The second thing that they should be looking for is where decisions are actually made. And so where decisions are actually made is this. Who do you go to for a decision? Who do you go to when things need to happen, who can make things happen around you, then the list of key players in your organisation is really fascinating because most executives will say, oh, that will be the CEO, our risk manager, our finance person. And actually, when you get that list of names, it's very, very, very rare. Isn't anyone on the executive at all, and they'll be distributed around your business, but there'll be big bubbles of people. So you'll find one person in that division who everybody knows, is the go to person to make things happen and make decisions. So then who makes decisions? Where's the power sit in an organisation will actually tell you where the branches or the divisions of your business that are actually falling away or not being aligned, where they're actually aligned and who they're aligned to is a really powerful piece of data. And then there's a whole bunch of things that we always recommend people start with, which is your pipeline of people who come in, where do they come from people who go out where do they go to? Who's in the business, your diversity data is, will tell you who can get in and who can dwell and who moves up your pipeline, but equally who can't get in and where do they stop? And so, you know, we've worked with businesses for example, where 85% of their CEO and CEO minus one and two which is the very tippy top of the company, 85% of them have come into those roles from outside the business. And if you've got 85% of your most senior leaders coming from outside, you've got very little of your grassroots culture ever getting to the top. And that's a really interesting diagnostic because you sort of go, why is that? And what does it mean? The people at the top really see the people in the rest of the organisation? Oh, there's so many things I want to explore there.

Helga Svendsen 9:24

I just want to go back to that second point about where decisions are made from moment to things there how in practice, because I remember you saying that at the Australian Government's summit, and for people who listen to the podcast regularly, you will know that I noted that in my summary of

the Australian Government summit when I did the podcast about it. So I'm interested in two things there. One, how you actually map that you just go out and ask people about it. But secondly, I mean, I think having that distributed model of power is actually incredibly powerful for organisations you don't want to hear, or the CEO has all of the power or the exact swayed or whoever it Maybe you'd actually want to hear that the organisation has that distributed power model because that there's no other way an organisation can really operate.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 10:08

It's much more sustainable. everyone's on the same page. It's only when you when you pick it up, you sort of go, okay, isn't this interesting that this, this division where we have a whole lot of exits. So we have a whole lot of bullying claims, we have a whole lot of whatever it happens to be that isn't good. And interesting that they've got different decision makers and a different alignment than the rest of the organisation. That's when you start to say, actually, all those things linked together.

Helga Svendsen 10:34

Yeah, it's such a powerful thing to ask and to find out about. You then talked about, of course, diversity and inclusion and how to get people through the organisation and the opportunities and who gets in and who doesn't. In a board sense, there's two sides to this that I'd love to explore a how to boards find out about their organisations, and how diverse and inclusive they are, but secondly, for boards themselves. How can we showcase inclusiveness in the boardroom.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 11:02

They're both really important questions, aren't they? Because if you've got a board that doesn't actually look like society or the community, or whatever, then you really when you get into social licence to operate, there going to be quite many blind spots to it. So that's a bit of a problem. But to take your first question, how do I get to diversity there is obviously the traditional angles of diversity, which are gender, generational age, cold cultural and linguistic diversity LGBTI disability, there's a sector that we always look at Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander so that those things are recognized important aspects of diversity in our community, and they should be in your company too. So you sort of measuring who's in your organisation, how they move up in those categories. The second thing though, the one thing they have in common and why diversity becomes important socially, is social economic diversity. Now we had for a long time in working with what we call privilege index and the way that we built that was fine appreciative inquiry and then mapping against boards, and also senior executive teams, or C suite and Australian listed companies. And then we took it across to government departments as well. There's a very high correlation between a privilege score in Australia and a number of factors. There's 10 factors that absolutely correlate to the top of organisations, government, public, private doesn't really matter. What's fascinating about those things that is that if your board or your organisation is made up of just that people who are very top tippity, top of the privilege index, you really missing a lot of society. And it will make it difficult for

you to be as creative as you need to be or as thoughtful on where society goes, or what's the next thing that you should be looking at. When you see teams of people or organisations that have got socio economic diversity. They're really starting to shift the dial about their role in society to become much more relevant, much more connected. I think it's a very, very powerful school and it's not one that's used often enough, but every single time we've used it, the board and the senior team is sitting at eight, nine or 10, out of 10. And the 10 scores, the direct reports to that group are sitting 7.5. Even your people, supervisors are often five out of 10, which means you've literally got huge number of people that just don't even see the light of day in terms of being a people leader in most organisations unless they've been born with a certain degree of privilege. Now, does that mean it's bad to have privileged nine, we always look at privileges if you have a lot of privilege, you have an opportunity to change things, you have more, you know, the rules of the game, you've been coached on how networks work and everything from childhood, you know how to bring people up, you can actually reach down you can do very different things. And if you don't understand the rules of that game, we see privilege as an opportunity. And the question for boards is, how are you using it?

Helga Svendsen 13:54

You've got a tool to map the privilege index of organisations and of boards. How do you do that? Tell me about that.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 14:00

10 really simple questions and the answers are literally with this one. It's a very simple index. So it's literally yes or no answers to 10 questions that we know correlate to privilege in Australian corporate society. So we literally go, Wow, just score out of 10. And then what we would do with a group of people is say, okay, the average in your executive team is eight and a half. That's high. So who else is in your pipeline? And when you're looking at your talent mapping and things like that, what does that look like?

Helga Svendsen 14:28

Right? And so for those organisations that take it on is the, the idea is to then bring in people who are not so high on the privilege index to build that diversity. And how did I do that?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 14:41

What you're looking at is your accessibility of your organisation. So I'll give you a really good example, a client that had a really good graduate program and they're saying, Oh, we've got graduates coming in. They're all very diverse and very different. One of the tiny questions that was in amongst the graduate questions was, have you done volunteer? And there was a bias towards people who've done international volunteering. Now that question in and of itself will wipe out 90%

of the population. Because if you're a normal kid in a normal school or you're at normal uni, and you've got your own Higgs phase, and you're trying to pay a bit off for that summer job, and all this sort of jazz, then going on in the international volunteering, habitat, or whatever happened to be all wonderful organisations, but that's not even an option. You don't have \$10,000 to pay for airfare in your accommodation in Cambodia. You literally are working really hard or somebody get back to uni. So you've got some money in your pocket. So that tiny question which sounded like, Well, isn't that great? There's a great young people who are giving up their summers to go and volunteer. That's true, but very few people would have that opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 15:46

It often strikes me as exactly that when we're looking at opportunities or volunteering or whatever it may be often, kids or adults are just working. They're not volunteering, they need to work so much be, you know, working down at the local supermarket or whatever it may be. And that is that is valuable experience as well. And often just what needs to happen.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 16:09

And when you also see the other thing happens with the privilege index is a fascinating conversation suddenly happens. So you couldn't executive team or a board that at all, you know, at a certain level of privilege might be eight, nine out of 10, that usually is average for all their organisations added together is 8.5. So it's very high. And so all of a sudden, you'll have one person in that team that said, three, and awesome, they say, Wow, tell us about your experience. And suddenly this person who, for all intents and purposes, has been doing their job brilliantly, has never had an issue always fitted into the group is suddenly telling them stories that they've never heard. And those stories will actually be more likely to be normal stories of normal people than the other ones that people use living around that table. And I think it just lets you have a little bit of a window into the community that you're serving in. And the clients or customers that each organisation works for.

Helga Svendsen 17:03

So with boards using that privilege index, have you seen boards really change their makeup as a result of that? If so, how did they do it?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 17:12

I've been thinking about it. And so what happens then is the next time they pick someone, that will be a question they start to ask. And so instead of going, you know, I really don't care where they went to school, I only care that they got a Bachelor of Law from Sydney Uni or something like that. They start to go, Wow, this person's got bad, but they've also come from this background. That's very interesting. That's a different combination. So they're starting to look deeper into the history of

the person a little bit. Now, it doesn't mean that it's always we need every type of diversity, we have to be perfect, called every single time. But even that conversation means that when you're saying, let's look at a talent map or something which goes up to the board, who are our successes to our executive team, you're starting to look to pull people into that pool that might not normally have been considered in there. I would say the same if you're talking to groups of people that got people with disability, they see themselves as absolutely the poorest relation in the organisation. If you start to go, Wow, entire succession plan doesn't have anyone who identifies with disability. That's unusual considering that 15% of the population has some sort of disability.

Helga Svendsen 18:19

Oh, that is such fantastic insights and advice. And what a great tool to have. Is there some information we might be able to put in the show notes about that?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 18:27

Yeah, sure. Yeah, sure. We can, we can put a bit of a link across to it and have a look. And the other one, when we talked about relationships and how you met decision makers and things like that. There's also that where you can sort of go there's just a couple of questions you need to ask, which will give you a map of where your most energizing employees are, where your most connecting employees are, were you the big decision makers, the people who make things happen. Other questions like Who do you think will do well here, surprisingly accurate people can look around their graduate cohort and say, I think it's going to be better person that will be someone that's so highly correlated to people already at the top. It's not funny. So just as questions, create a different conversation and different understanding of how we work together.

Helga Svendsen 19:10

Oh, I love it. That is fantastic. I'm looking forward to having a bit more of a look into that as well. Thinking about diversity and inclusion, and particularly in the boardroom, one of the key things that I hear from people and that that certainly I know as well is that the person in the chair, literally in the chair and in the chair role is key to having a cohesive, cohesive might not even be the right word. Because often if there is diversity, there is actually less cohesiveness. And that's a powerful thing too. But an effective boardroom, let's put it that way. So what makes a great chair, what what can they do to make a really great difference?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 19:50

I think there's a couple of things that when you see a really great share, and I've had the pleasure of working with a few his people that have absolute respect for them, but not fear So as soon as you say someone who rules a little bit with fear, and you do see them in a lot of boards is, then you'll

shut down any use or leverage of inclusion or diversity that you could have had. And so that sort of personality of a leader is someone who can control time and efficiency, because these are important people, and they're all in the room for a short period of time. But at the same time is allowing for conversation is allowing space. And often they'll also sort of bring the conversation out, they'll be looking for people who haven't participated and say, Look, you know, I'm really interested in your view. I haven't heard from you for a while I know that this is a topic you'd love, would you like to speak? And so they're actually inviting different people into the conversation constantly so that it's not just, whenever we do this topic, that's those two people or whenever we do that topic, it's different to people. It's actually hearing different voices on different topics, and also challenging the people around the boardroom to know what they're talking about. You know, I think that you know, the number of times, you'll hear conversation around the future of work. And they'll suddenly say, the future of work is all gig economy and you go, well, statistically, that would not be true. So if you challenge people, instead of saying the future is a gig economy, they say why do you think that? What does that data point from and I think the board should hold themselves to account and a good chair will do that with a velvet glove, but still clearly and sort of not just let people give an opinion that's baseless, and move on. They're actually Where did that come from? Help us understand, can we all get to know that can we read I think a good board is one where people are learning open, looking for different data points, knowing their topics, and not just giving random opinions on things.

Helga Svendsen 21:41

And you know, sometimes on boards, the chair is not as open as we would like them to be and not as inviting as the person you're describing or that that that role in the chair. Have you got any advice for board members in, I guess backlighting, some of that Diversity and Inclusion when the chair might not be as open to things.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 22:03

Um, certainly if you've been in a board for a while in your relationship with the chair and the rest of the team is actually in pretty good shape. And you've formed relationships away from the boardroom to I think, you know, the simple ketchups. And things like that become very important. But I think when you hold the position, you've been there for a while, you've got much more of an opportunity to do the role. Like if, if you can say things, okay, the chairs not including people, you could say, look, we haven't heard from Hell yeah, for a while, I'd love to hear your view on that. I know that you've got some great background on this topic. So you can invite other people in and start to be a person who knits people together. And that's what we see in normal teams every day. But something about the boardroom becomes more artificial than that. So when we start to look at cultural and organisational culture of a team, or division or something like that, we're always looking at what are the relationships that matter? Not necessarily who's in charge, but who's actually gluing people together? Who's making people feel like they belong here? Who's asking the questions. making people feel like they can add value. Because when we talk about a feeling of belonging, it's a feeling of, we absolutely have the confidence and we want to give our best. But there's, we always look at elements like the purpose of work. Sure. We look at things like relationships, absolutely. But

the two things we don't talk enough about the agency you have of you work and the way that you can do it. And in a board, that's very important to say, I'm going to bring in a piece of information that I think the board could learn from that I've just discovered that's really valuable. That's a value add into the room, not just I turn up and do what I'm told, and I walk away again, and the rules have been set five years ago and the whole thing, that agency to add something to do something a little bit differently. And the fourth thing we don't talk nearly enough about in leadership, but also in in the boardroom is this accountability. You know, I you know, I still am flabbergasted to walk into a board or a senior team for that matter where you'll say someone Okay, we've had these papers, everybody's read them. We've turned up ready to purchase afraid. And you'll say someone, I've had a really tough week and I didn't get to read them and you're like, wow. At a bare minimum, you turn up sort of accountable. And and there's a way, in a really good team, you're actually holding people to account you're holding accountability and expectation that we will perform well and do our best. And so when you get a really good team where people absolutely belong, and feel confident to speak up, you're talking about purpose relationships, agency, and also accountability and expectation, not just you turn up, but you turn up good.

Helga Svendsen 24:34

Yeah, it's it's a really interesting reflection around, you know, particularly for the role of the chair that the authority role versus leadership and everybody in that board boardroom should be able to show some form of leadership in asking the prompting question, whatever it may be, whether it's about bringing people in or about the substance of what's on the agenda of that board meeting. And in fact, if board members can't do that, then one would wonder why they're in the boardroom. Anyway. Why so many fabulous things? So we've covered off on a huge amount of wonderful tips for board members. One of the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today,

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 25:14

I would love to continue this change we're seeing at the moment where I want board members and senior leaders to be deeply interested in culture, not some rhetoric about, you know, people in my most important asset, but actually, why and how do they come together? And what do I know about the relationships? And what numbers Am I looking at what data points to my using not hypothesizing? My genuinely understanding the culture of your organisation. And the time it takes to do that I would take away those silly 20 minute presentations that are like a puppet show of rehearsed information and actually say, we've got three hours and we're going to talk about culture every six months for three hours because it's so important and in that three hours We'll absolutely have these three or four data sets that we look at whether it be belonging or privilege or diversity or, or relationships or decision making, get those data points. And then say we've got this space to have a conversation about how they correlate and how they move together. And that way, you can see that they do map together. When we look at things like bullying and harassment, as we can tell you almost to it, a high degree of accuracy with a bullying claim will be found by looking at the data around it. When you look at all these data points, you've got high exits, you've got high redundancies

without cause you've got strange people making decisions and power. You've got all these data points that the Boolean crime needs that environment to survive in and they almost always get together. So I would say the most important thing, it's a long answer, but the most important thing is the time to get the right information and the time to have the conversation about it.

Helga Svendsen 26:56

Absolutely. Yeah. Having that, that real understanding and wrestling with some of the information that is in there. And is there a resource that you would like to share with the take on board community? It could be a book or a TED talk or a podcast or anything, is there a resource you'd like to share?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 27:13

Well, I've done a TED talk. And I've written a lot in this. So quite aside from that, though, the one thing I would say to leaders just to think differently about how people come together culturally, because we still talk about individual leadership, we're still talking about individuals engagement. If we want to understand the collective, there's a book called The power of others, by a guy called Michael bond takes a couple of hours to read. It's a psychology book for that, but it is a really good way to encapsulate the fact that we are not just when we come to work one person good, bad or indifferent. We're actually having a massive impact on each other. And it's when we understand the impact on each other, whether that be at the macro level, like inside the boardroom or the macro level. The culture of an organisation. That's what we're talking about our impact on each other.

Helga Svendsen 28:05

Fantastic. Well, I'll make sure we share a link to both your TED talk and the that book in the show notes so people can find it easily. That is fantastic. And if there was one action, one task you could give board members to do around all of this, what would be the one thing you would ask people to do?

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 28:23

Make sure that you have the information to have the conversation about culture? And when you don't have it? Keep asking until you do. Ah, that is fabulous.

Helga Svendsen 28:31

Thank you so much for your time today. I'm sure people can can tell that when I heard you speak at that conference, they knew exactly Now, having heard more of what you've got to say, why was that

I sent your message immediately afterwards and said, Please come on the tech on board podcast. It's been a pleasure. And thank you for sharing your wisdom with the take on board community today.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall 28:52

Absolutely. My pleasure. And I hope this conversation just keeps getting more and more embedded in the way we think about organisation.