



Take on Board

# Transcript – Jenny Anderson

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Jenny Andersson about the role of boards in creating regenerative economies. First, let me tell you about Jenny. Jenny is on the board of coast to capital, an organisation that seeks to ensure that their local towns and cities are known around the world as fantastic places to live. She is a creative strategist and trusted advisor who has worked with global brands, scale ups and startups for over 30 years on communications and sustainability strategies. Today, she concentrates on working with organisations that are accelerating a shift from sustainability to regenerative strategies. Jenny is CEO of we activate the future, a strategy and narrative development consultancy, and she's co founder of the really regenerative Center, a community interest company helping business and citizens of Sussex to develop resilient, integrated and regenerative economies and ecologies through learning journeys, which explore the potential of place. Welcome to the Take On Board, Podcast Jenny.

Jenny Andersson 1:02

Thanks for inviting me. Looking forward to this.

Helga Svendsen 1:05

It is fantastic to have you here. Now, Jenny, before we talk about the role of boards in creating regenerative economies, I'd love to just explore a little bit more about you. Can you tell me about young Jenny and tell me a story about that. That gives us a bit of an insight about how you got to where you are today.

Jenny Andersson 1:26

I was born in Brixton, in south of London, which when I was born in the 60s was a really poor community, but it was a very multi ethnic multicultural community, probably one of the first areas in Britain that had an influx of the Windrush generation. And on the street where I lived, we had people from the Caribbean, we had people from Nigeria, we had people from Portugal, and we all got along absolutely fine. Of course, we had different cultural hits. But we had one thing in common in that, you know, we were poor. And so we all got along well, I mean, I'll be served as a child but what I think it developed in me what it made me very aware of at an early age was difference is okay. And multiculturalism was normal to me before it was even a word. I grew up with a lot of different cultures around me a lot of different people. And I saw how what is common to the two

people brings them together. So I grew up with a very strong feeling of inclusion being important inclusion and diversity being important. And I think that's something that I carried with me into my career, again, long before diversity and inclusion was important to boards or important organisations. I'm really grateful that I grew up with it as a natural instinct. To me, I didn't have to learn how important diversity is to creating innovation and creativity in a business. I didn't have to learn the value of inclusion. Of course, you still have to be enormously mindful of it. And mindful of things like the organisation's impose on themselves like quitters. But I think if you grew up in an environment where it's natural to you, it's an instinct rather than a learned response. I took that with me and that still is very, very even though I don't work in diversity and inclusion. I never worked in HR. It was always valuable to me, particularly when building brand strategies with my first business, my creative agency to really understand its value and advertising public relations communications in the 80s and 90s. and possibly even still, today is still a predominantly white business here. We have to remember to bring in the minority voice and the minority voice is almost always where creativity and innovation comes from. It's that fire at the edges kind of thing.

Helga Svendsen 4:13

Well, two things (a) what a fantastic lesson to have with you from childhood that diversity is strength, diversity and inclusion is strengthened what a lost opportunity for those areas that don't have it. Because you're right, it's the basis for innovation and creativity and new ideas and and so on.

Jenny Andersson 4:30

I mean, organisations are working really incredibly hard to understand diversity and inclusion and how to do it. You know, I think we can be a bit clunky about it at times. You know, quotas legislation is always in many ways a last resort to affect change. But you know, and I've never been necessarily one for all we must have 50% women and 50% men or all we know Do we have multicultural inclusion here? And, you know, tokenism is not the same as ensuring that everybody has the same opportunities in society is a different thing. It's a it's a clunky solution to a complex problem.

Helga Svendsen 5:15

I tend to agree that it is a clunky solution. I confess I'm a fan of quotas. But I think that i think that's only because other ways of ensuring equality, inclusion and inclusion don't seem to have worked very well. I would love it if we didn't have a need for quotas.

Jenny Andersson 5:31

I agree. You know, it is a necessary intervention. But you wish it wasn't? Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 5:39

So, today, we're talking about the role of the board in creating regenerative economies. And I'm wondering first you can just tell us what is a regenerative economy?

Jenny Andersson 5:51

I can certainly give it a go. The regenerative field is wide and it encompasses lots of different disciplines from things like permaculture and eco villages, right up to global business. So for me, I would describe a regenerative economy as one in which businesses act intentionally to regenerate a degenerated landscape. So to put right where we have overshoot planetary boundaries in terms of the ecology and the environment that we live in, and depends on, but it's also one other thing, and that is intentionally committing to developing the best potential of the human spirit. And those two things I think needs to come together inside organisations. And what we find currently is some organisations are working very hard at their planetary impacts through their sustainability departments through the circular economy, and others are working hard at being deliberately developmental organisation. So really committing to helping people grow as human beings helping themselves escalate through self actualize through the levels of human psychological development, but very few are doing both. And I genuinely believe if we can bring those two strands together in organisations, we will create better organisations for the future of the human experience on earth.

Helga Svendsen 7:30

In doing that, in bringing those strands together, and you know, creating a really regenerative economy, what is the role of the board? What, what can boards do to support, encourage and motivate this

Jenny Andersson 7:45

really good question. I think the first thing is about learning and education for boards themselves, is we are appointed to boards for different reasons. So the first thing is they're designed boards is having more in different people with different levels of experience on boards that have been learning about the regenerative economy or starting perhaps to learn about the circular economy. Many of the boards that I've sat on tend to be comprised of people from a specific discipline. On a skills board, you'll have people from human resources on a leadership board, you'll you might have, again, people from human resources, but I think that we need to create boards that are wider in their experience, but ticularly, including people who have a systemic level of experience that our business relates to so let me give you an example. If you're IKEA, for example, what's your systemic potential to regenerate? Your systemic potential to regenerate is looking at the product lines that you develop? What are they dependent on? They are dependent on forests, they're dependent on sheep and wool. They're dependent on cotton and linen. So you have a systemic opportunity and responsibility to look at your impact on those parts of nature and put into your strategic plan or

regenerative regenerative capacity. But if you don't have anybody on your board that comes from that background that has a deep understanding of how a forest system works in a global landscape, then you don't have anyone to go to for advice. So I think the first is about composition of boards is really looking at something different. And I'm working with a number of small companies in the UK, who are actually creating regenerative economy boards, specific boards that are there to look at how the company operates in the wider systemic world and support them with knowledge and advanced. Another thing is, is perhaps to almost create internal boards that may not be boards in the traditional sense in that they may not have legislative and legal responsibility. But developing a core global board inside a business that is comprised of people from all different disciplines and is additional and to their day job, if you like, but has responsibility to hold the company to account for its impact on human potential and its impact on the ecology and environment? I think he's also an interesting approach and different approach. And, again, companies like seventh generation, I don't know if you have that in Australia, but I think that you do have been doing that for a number of decades, through the auspices of the fantastic board advisor call Carol Sanford. You know, I think that's that's another way to look at it.

Helga Svendsen 11:02

Hmm. I, I had a conversation very recently with somebody about the role of advisory boards and advisory boards versus both boards of governance. And I think what I'm hearing from you is those advisory boards, once they're freed of the legal obligations of being a director might be able to be more open to some of these creative and innovative conversations.

Jenny Andersson 11:22

I think there is that and, you know, we actually met when we were talking about what is the future of governance and what what does governance look like in a regenerative economy? And, you know, and I think we have to be prepared to really think differently about what the role of boards can be. And I do wonder if that very traditional board role that has a directorial responsibility, which comes with fiscal responsibility and profit driving and growth objectives, all not too bad. Things in themselves, but things that we have to really think about and consider around the question of what is enough? And that is a huge question for business and for boards to grasp, because traditionally, again, boards have been there to help companies grow and develop. And you know, on a finite planet under threat of extinction, the biggest question boards can ask of their organisations is, what is enough? And how do we answer that question?

Helga Svendsen 12:32

Absolutely. It is it yeah, it's key, isn't it? And for me, it's the balance between short term and long term thinking. And the long term thinking for an organisation might have different things that they think about as compared to some of that short term thinking from the organisations that you've observed. What has helped them to really consider that what is enough question?

Jenny Andersson 12:57

Well, we're in an interesting period. To this moment, and I think so prior to COVID-19, prior to the pandemic, I think things like the climate change means man, that growing social movement led by extinction rebellion or Greta Thunberg. That social wave of unrest about the what could happen with climate change in the future, was starting to permeate just a small amount into board and organisational thinking, whether you're organizing, you know, you're a city municipality or a global business board, and you could start to see some long term thinking being brought in to board strategy and board advisory boards. I mean, I was brought on to the Costa Capital board for just that reason, because I had a very long term and different view of what skills development in our locale should be, but what we are seeing currently is an immediate shift back to the immediate and the short term. And that is natural. When you think back to 2008. We saw something rather similar and we've been carrying that headache for long enough is that when people are under threat, they've retrenched very quickly into survival consciousness and to survival action. And certainly in our landscape in Sussex, at the moment where I sit on Kosta capital's board, you know, we face a potential threat of long term unemployment for a generation of young people. So we have to address that we have to look at that immediate need. And there is real potential that whilst we're looking at the immediate and urgent fallout of COVID-19, that we take our eye off the ball of the long term future that everything that we've started to build to think about You know, what does the future landscape of skills look like, for a developing regenerative economy, we'll get lost in the scramble to restructure and reorganize and try to find some way to create jobs and develop employment opportunities for young people. And I think at that point in time, a board's responsibility is to really dig in and not allow itself to become a rubber stamp. for immediate and urgent action, even though we understand that that's required to remember that we are actually working towards a long term stable future and that that is inevitably going to look very different to the past. So one of the things I think that is really important for boys to develop is a capacity to do scenario planning and to influence scenario planning, when you're building on forecast You're looking at what has occurred in the past and building your strategies on that you are inevitably building for the future based on a different scenario that has happened in the past. So you can't build creative solutions if they're based on data and strategy. So we're in past cultures or past occurrences. So I think bringing scenario planning into boards would be very, very interesting strategy.

Helga Svendsen 16:29

So you've mentioned and Coast to Capital there. And of course, I touched on it in the introduction, if you could tell us about what that organisation does. And also, you know, you've talked there about that, for your selves around that balance between short term and long term thinking, how's your organisation? How is that organisation making sure they keep their eye on the long term in their thinking?

Jenny Andersson 16:54

Well, Coast to Capital is what's called a local economic partnership. So it's a government organisation. And we have a number of those throughout the UK that are responsible for putting in place the local industrial strategy that falls out of the government's national economic strategy. And certainly at Coast to Capital, the local industrial strategy was delayed by the covid outbreak because we've had to really look at it again and I sit on the skills advisory board. And inevitably, we have to take into account the first immediate thing you have to do is go back and look at your data and your possibilities and projections and scenario plans of what might actually happen in your locale. And in our region, we were particularly hit because one of the big drivers of our region is the second largest airport in the UK, which is Gatwick Airport and Gatwick Airport has suffered a catastrophic shutdown because of COVID-19 and it certainly will not open up is not opening up but The same capacity and that has a massive knock on effect on the entire region. And certainly to a degree, the skills strategy for our region is driven by that huge economic center. So we are having to look at short term action and short term thinking. But I think because the board has been comprised of very varied and very diverse set of people, people, such as myself who come from smaller businesses, and whose businesses are focused on future strategy, businesses like Gatwick Airport that are also on the advisory board, but we don't just have people from human resources. We have people from education, we have people from technology so that we can look at all aspects of what we might do in a region. And we meet regularly and we correspond regularly and I think people on the board do over and above what is expected. To the board to look at potential creative solutions. Now, it's very difficult for the organisation itself to continue to take on board at this moment in time, those what you would call right on the edge creative solutions, because we don't know until the dust settles, what the investment landscape is going to look like that is going to change. But what I think is important is that Kosta capital as a lab is probably one of the better labs doing it really focuses on building long term relationships. And another organisation bizarrely enough that did this very well is the Center for epidemic preparedness. And they stepped into scenario planning from forecasting a couple of years ago. One of the things that they focused on was understanding that in an in an emergency what gets you through an emergency his relationships is that you have diverse and wide relationships in place right across your industry. Because you don't have time to build friendships and relationships in an emergency there has to be there. If you are struggling with relationships, you're dead in the water, it's not going to work for you. And Kosta capital is very good at that has spent a number of years now building relationships up right across the economy, so that they are in place when an emergency hits not that we predicted this particular one. I don't think anyone necessarily predicted it other than biologists had been trying to tell governments what was going to happen for ages. And that is another way in which a board can be very influential is to continue to build relationships on behalf of the organisation. It might seem a little facile, it might seem a little fluffy, to be doing networking, that doesn't look as if it's ever going to be necessary until it is necessary. Then, you know, you have the strength of your relationships support you through difficult times?

Helga Svendsen 21:06

Absolutely, you'll get no argument out of me that I think a key role for any group, any organisation is those relationships and building those relationships. So on that point, just what's your view about what the board's role is in building those relationships? what's appropriate for boards to do in this space? And indeed, what might not be appropriate for boards to do in terms of building relationships?

Jenny Andersson 21:31

I think it comes down to transparency of communication. So first off, you know, you can't go off building relationships on behalf of your organisation without the permission of the chair. And it's something that I think needs to be on the board's agenda on a regular basis, is, you know, what relationships do we need, in what scenarios? What don't we have and whose responsibility is it to build those relationships that could be quite challenging for a board chair, if they've got somebody on their board that might be considered a little more creative, a little bit more Maverick, someone, someone like me, you know, you don't want to think a board's responsibility around governance and reputation is really important. So I think it's about the transparency of and having the conversations at a senior level about what is needed and whose responsibility it is and who's going to, you know, who's going to take that on and how those relationships are going to be built. Because they have to be above board, they have to be visible. And they have to be for a clear reason,

Helga Svendsen 22:43

Jenny, this has been such a helpful conversation, I think, for people to think long term to think strategically and indeed regeneratively, about boards and what they should be doing. What are the key points that you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Jenny Andersson 23:00

Well, I think firstly, that to start to think differently about what a board's role could be, particularly advisory boards, and to start to look at advice and inputs that you might have considered not as necessary or not as important, so almost like a futurist board is, what is company's role going to be in the future? And how is that future going to unfold? It is shifting from a just in time to adjusting case mentality in a way is, what kind of boards do we need for the kind of scenarios that might play out in the future. And I think COVID-19 has been a really wake up call. From that point of view. I think if we look at what COVID-19 has done to businesses, the impact that it's had, what kind of board which To build that would be better place to respond to that kind of emergency because mobile comm that is the inevitability of the path of impacts of climate change, because we've taken our eyes slightly off the ball of climate change while we've been dealing with this, but that is an inevitable part. That's the first thing and probably being a little more courageous with the mix of people that you bring into boards, even considering bringing in more young people who have a very

different perspective on the future than seasoned business people do, I think could be interesting for boards, but above all, really to keep the focus on that diversity of thoughts, that diversity of advice and that mix of different thinking that you can get if you step outside the kind of normal boards set up, which is a people who have built and grown and developed businesses, you know, so one or two people who are likely to ask you difficult questions and met create space for that and allow it to happen that those, you know, how much is enough? Those? How is colonialism represented in our business and what do we need to do about it? Are we really genuinely diverse? What is our cosmology as a board? What do we really believe? bringing those questions which are deep leadership questions into an organisation through a board I think could be very interesting.

Helga Svendsen 25:45

And is there a resource that you would like to share with the take on board community?

Jenny Andersson 25:51

Certainly for anybody who is interested in learning about regenerative economy, do go to a website called [connectle.com](https://connectle.com) and look for the regenerative community. There's a whole series of podcasts there with different leaders in regenerative thinking from business through to regenerative agriculture and leadership. That's a great resource. If you're a reader and you like medium, we have a platform called activate the future on which we've got a number of different writers who write on everything from developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, regenerative business systems thinking, all of that you can find lots of different articles there, which both of those hopefully be helpful.

Helga Svendsen 26:34

Fantastic. And I'll make sure I put a link to both of those in the show notes for the episode today. Brilliant. Thank you so much for your time today, in having this conversation, like I say, I think there are just many pearls of wisdom in there for people in thinking about that really long term view and strategic thinking for boards. So thank you so much for taking the time to join us today.

Jenny Andersson 26:55

You're welcome. It was a good early start for me to the day. Thanks for having me.