



Take on Board

# Transcript – Elana Rubin

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Elana Rubin about diversity and culture. First, let me tell you about Elana. Alana is on the boards of Afterpay Ltd, Telstra Ltd, Slater and Gordon Ltd and several unlisted and government entities. She has previously been on the boards of AustralianSuper Mirvac, ME Bank WorkSafe Victoria and the Transport Accident Commission. Elana started her career in social policy and industrial relations at the ACTU before moving to superannuation, where she was the investment director for a large industry super fund. She then moved into non executive director roles working across a wide range of sectors. She is a strong believer in organisations with purpose and in social licence to operate. Her interests include social policy, social equity, travel and cinema two things that we're not able to do right at the moment. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast Elana.

Elana Rubin 0:59

Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me. It is fabulous to have you here.

Helga Svendsen 1:04

And I should say, I don't always date my podcasts. But at the moment given we are in the middle of a global pandemic, we are recording this at the end of July, when unfortunately, you're not able to do much travel or cinema, or you're doing home cinema instead.

Elana Rubin 1:21

We certainly are. And I thank our lucky stars that we have streaming services, because we have a movie night most nights because there's not much else to do. So, you know, we've watched a wide range of movies and TV shows and docos and really whenever I see or speak to any friend, I say at the end, and what are you watching and text me if they're good?

Helga Svendsen 1:51

Yes, we all need those shared lists about movies we need to say.

Elana Rubin 1:55

That's right. And there's been some fabulous things that I've watched really interesting things about change and cultures of silence I watched a fabulous doco on Bobby Kennedy and just his passion for change. I watched a doco on athlete A, which is the story of a doctor that worked with the American Olympic team who sexually abused girls over a long period of time, but because the team was winning, no one really picked it up and acted on what was sort of Nolan. And that was just amazing. I think there's Michael Jordan's Last Dance which just about an incredibly competitive person, that one who learned the importance of a team rather than being just alone, superstar man, I've watched some amazing you know, sort of political dramas and BBC cop show and just a wide range - eclectic.

Helga Svendsen 3:05

Well, that is one of the small upsides to the time that we are living through at the moment that if you can't get out to the cinemas to see at least you're able to see things in it at the home cinema. So a lot of before we talk about diversity and culture and a bit about your journey to and in the boardroom. I would love to just firstly dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell us a story about young Elana, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Elana Rubin 3:39

On the younger Elana was, you know, in hindsight, very fortunate to have the family context that I grew up in, but my parents were from Eastern Europe and with a couple of stops settled in Australia, but they were really social activists and active politically they had a strong sense of social justice. And they had a keen belief that you needed to participate to advance change. And as a young Elana, I think there were times that I just wanted to fit into my peer group, and none of their parents sort of yelled at the TV during the TV news, as my father used to do that their parents didn't really watch the news and went through a stage. I wish my parents were a lot less vocal about some of these things. But as I grew older, I really appreciated the lessons that they taught me, which was about a belief in strong communities and that we're all far better off, not just economically but socially, when we are part of a strong community and I really appreciate it The lesson that they taught me around, if you believe in change, and you want change, you can't wait for someone else that everybody has a role to play. And some people will be leaders, a massive, huge following that everybody through their actions has a role to play in setting an example and advocating for the change that they want. So sort of the context of me being interested in social reform and social change. I went through university, and this will age me dramatically when it was still free. So I stayed there. And you know, I was lucky enough I did that, honestly, for my BA and then I did an MA. And my first job was in the Commonwealth Government in their graduate program, which I did sort of for a year and a bit and then I went to the ACTU. And that was just before or coincided with the election of the Hawke / Keating government where the ACTU played a very significant role in economic and social policy reform, and together with business participate with government, so it was very much a tripartite model of policy development. And that was just a fabulous time anyone who is interested in social policy or change or, you know, addressing past barriers or inequities, it was a fabulous time

and it was led by Phil Kiltie, who irrespective of people's politics, in that is almost universally regarded as a brilliant strategist and leader and played a huge role in reforming you know, workplaces and providing the basis for what then became decades of productivity growth. And I went there you know, with a significant lack of confidence and bewilderment how I could get into an organisation like that everybody was incredibly confident. And it was a very flat organisation. There wasn't a hierarchy at all. But I was just so fortunate to work for two people at the ACTU most influential been Bill, who gave you in a sense, the status of the ACTU you when you went into meetings and there were very generous about developing their staff and particularly brave about putting women in senior roles.

And, Bill, we wouldn't use the word then, today's word was a very active sponsor for me. And, you know, there were many, too many occasions actually, to count that. He would say I'm doing something, I can't do it, you do it and you would walk, I would walk into a room and people would sort of ask me about bills, new secretary, and, you know, was I going to tell them that he was running late? And you know, I'd be the only female in this room a very corporate men and at some would look up to them because they're all taller than me. No, it's me. So, um, so, uh, so many times.

But no matter what you felt internally, you actually had the authority of the organisation, you were standing on the shoulders in the sense of the organisation and that I found really helpful to just keep working through somewhat intimidating circumstances and meetings. In order to represent the people that I was supposed to represent as well as I couldn't. I felt that responsibility very keenly. Luckily was able to learn as I went with the support Bill and others, that's a very long winded way of saying where I am. That was. And from there, I actually went into superannuation because I was very interested in industrial law and I was doing a lot of advocacy at that time. And it was just the stash of the 3% superannuation contribution. And Bill, I thought that I should become more involved in superannuation, both in terms of policy, but also as a trustee. Yeah.

And I wanted to do law and I remember having this discussion with him where I said to him, I don't want to be an accountant and stormed out of the room. But it was a lesson because I actually trusted him. And he saw something in me that I didn't see, he saw that I have a genuine interest in reform and he could see, I could use that in a way where I can blend capital markets and better outcomes for investors, individual ordinary Australians something that I would have never seen myself but I trusted him and went and did some further studies in finance and investment in that put me in superannuation. And I have to say it was, if there is ever a sliding door moment for me, it was that discussion, because I can't tell you how much I loved working in super and being part of a movement where they were taking traditional investment models and doing that better, the entire sort of profit for men the concept that helping develop new asset classes being very early into new areas, and subsequently then opened up another career for me in non executive directorships. Without that conversation with Bill, if I had not trusted him and not been gained, do something different, I would have done a post grad in law and I would have had an entirely different career might have been interesting, but I don't think it would have been as interesting or as broad. Except

the lesson for me from that. And one that I encourage, particularly for women, is seek out a sponsor. Because when they're at their best, they will see something in you that you don't see yourself, and we'll help you navigate through that. And be open for ideas and opportunities, even though they may not be what you think you want at the time. Certainly served me incredibly well. And I think I've just been incredibly fortunate to have had those opportunities.

Helga Svendsen 11:55

Mm hmm. And it sounds like in a way, even though you didn't say seek it out, he sought you out and you are open to that in a way. And having that having that person to sponsor / mentor, whatever it may be incredibly valuable. And particularly in I'm thinking you've come through the trade union movement, and I should say for those that are potentially listening either within or outside Australia, the ACTU is the Australian Council of Trade Unions, so the peak trade union body in Australia, and for you having come through both the union movement into superannuation, and then and now also in a number of financial services organisations, not all known for their gender equality or diversity. So, now in your roles around a non executive director in a number of those organisations, what are some of the lessons that as a director, you are now applying around that diversity and creating that culture of diversity in those organisations?

Elana Rubin 13:00

I am absolutely passionate about diversity. And it's in its broadest sense. And not just women, but more broadly, and our corporations, whether they be private sector, public sector, not for profit would all be better if they reflected more of our community. It used to frustrate the life out of me when I was less patient than I am now. When organisations who say you know, we have the top talent, we have recruited the best people, and I'd look around the room, and there were all men. Mm hmm. And if you only fish in half the pot and how do you know that you've got the best talent?

The statistics, you know, would demand a different outcome. You know, women go through high school in equal numbers we enter university in equal numbers we graduate generally in equal numbers. In some areas, we actually dominate and others like science, a bit lower. But there is such a well educated cohort of women who enter the workforce. And then over time for various reasons, it the dropout causes the workplace just was not flexible enough to accommodate them, or friendly enough where they became invisible. And if you've got that talent that's, you know, society we've invested in that somehow doesn't show up in leadership roles, you have to think that there is something wrong in organizations broadly, rather than just a single organisation. There's something systemically wrong in how we look at talent and how we recruit. So I just think diversity is critical to ensure that we use all the talent that we have, that we deliver better outcomes.

Also just in terms of social equity, that we don't exclude people simply on how they look or the postcodes that they were born in, or they went to the wrong schools, all of those things. So I have a very strong belief in diversity, pleasing to say that strong belief is supported by a library of sound research, whether it's from Morgan Stanley or Credit Suisse or McKinsey or Bain report in the Harvard Business Review. These are not organisations that you would think are radical in any way, shape or form. They are traditional organisations. But even there, they recognise that the research shows clearly there are better organisational outcomes, where we capture all the talent available. We have deeper discussions, we avoid I think, and hence we have better outcomes.

Helga Svendsen 16:03

You know, it's a view that I absolutely share with listeners of this podcast will know that is part of my view as well. Given your involvement in superannuation and in financial services and around these supporting diversity, there has been a bit of talk recently about almost, I guess shareholder activism and shareholder activism supporting or if that's the right word, encouraging whatever it may be demanding more equality and diversity on boards, what's what's your view about that and about shareholders? Having a bit more of an active stance, I think shareholders have been incredibly patient. I mean, shareholders put their risk capital on the table and they have every right to ensure that the companies are working as habits that can full a long term return. Something's in business, you know, I really had and there's a risk involved and you have to innovate. But they're not to extract the value that can easily be achieved from diversity and inclusion is an absolute missed opportunity. And so I think shareholders have been incredibly patient by sitting back and saying to companies, you know, the research is there, you know, you can add value, find showing you've got diversity and inclusion, we've allowed to do it, you know, in your own way over time, that it's taking so long. And for those that are achieving that we can see the results but those that are laggards, we need to push you forward.

What's the board's role in encouraging diversity in establishing a good culture? What can boards do to really make sure these are the sorts of organisations that we're leading?

Elana Rubin 17:59

So I think boards are a key input into setting the tone and the culture of an organisation. We have a very important role of selecting the CEO and supporting him or her. And clearly having someone whose values align with understanding those diversity and inclusion dynamics are important. I also believe that the board can demonstrate through its own compensation, a belief in diversity and inclusion, how it walks the talk, and how it interacts with you know, the executive team and its staff will also reinforce either a positive belief in diversity and inclusion or not. And I do emphasise that inclusion patch. Because I have seen organisations who have started to make some inroads into diversity. But have forgotten that there's so many other signals in an organisation around who's in the a team who's not how we treat people who may need to leave at five o'clock rather than seven o'clock because they've got home responsibilities, even though they then pick up work, you know,

after the kids go to sleep. There are so many ways of either promoting an inclusive culture or not. And until we get 50/50 equal representation in the workplace where I think, you know, simply by critical numbers, inclusion will be part of our DNA. We actually have to be as mindful of inclusion as we do in diversity.

It's like, you know, in organisations, I ask for the team that's worked on a project to come in and present. And that's not just for the board to see the depth of talent in the organisation see emerging challenge. But it's also to give people a lower down in the organisation exposure to the board. I have sat through a number of presentations, where there are more junior female staff who've done a lot of the grunt work, who I've never given, you know, either five minutes to talk about what they contributed to the project, because the team leader hasn't thought enough about giving that to them. So you know, that's a discussion that the board can have afterwards and say, you know, our expectation is that, you know, everybody who worked on the project, but particularly the younger women, the younger men can just have five minutes to talk about their contribution. What a fabulous thing to do in front of the board. Both ways that I think the board can walk the talk small but meaningful steps.

Helga Svendsen 21:10

Yeah, that is such a practical tip for boards to take on just in terms of who's presenting to them and broadening that out to give exposure. It's a yeah, it's a beautiful tip. Earlier this year, there was a media report about your role, both as the director of members equity and also your role and Afterpay, raising issues around conflict of interest. I'm just wondering if you can touch on that for us today and about the issue at hand and also the impact they're with you.

Elana Rubin 21:45

Thank you. And there was an article that suggested I had a conflict of interest because members equity had written down and stopped a credit card project. What the article didn't do was put the whole story story. And part of that story was, in effect Members Equity, was continuing to develop their credit card program back on an old platform rather than the new platform. But it was a very botching article about me. And I felt it very acutely, because I am very conscious about good governance. I'm very conscious about conflicts. And the assertion that I wasn't adhering to my good governance principles was also a slap on the wrist of the members equity board, because, you know, they clearly hadn't addressed an issue that this journalist got should be addressed. The facts were quite different to what was reported. But what came afterwards, I thought was really interesting for me, and it certainly is been the experience of a number of senior women.

That, because we are still not as significant as we should be in number. There is this thing that a perceived failure, or perceived misstep or perceived error was far more heavily on women and men.

Men seem to go from one corporate mishap to another and it's just seen as part of a career where for women, it can often stop their careers. And my circumstance, I was very lucky, it didn't and, you know, I've continued after pay and, you know, the board requested that I chair so that was great. But I look at some of my female colleagues who have paid a very heavy price for a perceived failure. And it goes back to this concept that we assume men are competent. You know, they've always been in leadership roles ever since, you know, we were born, but women have to prove their competency. And that is a very different paradigm. And it's almost like if we give women the benefit of the data, that they're competent, and something untoward or they make a mistake, as I have to say, everybody doesn't make a rule from time to time. Suddenly, you know, collectively, we feel cheated. It's like, we thought you were good, but now you're not. And so we would draw any support. And you can track a number of very senior women who have had fabulous crease until one thing happened. And then the opportunities dried out. Whereas you look at males who have had similar problems, who continue on because they may they've always been competent was just an issue. Yeah. And I think the price that women pay is very different. And I want to highlight that because it's twofold. One is we have to stop treating the genders differently.

And second, it's really important that it doesn't put off young women. So I look and talk to many young women who feel that some roles are just too risky. And it's not because the business it self is risky, but it's high profile. It's a disruptor. It's very fast. It's in a sector that's changing rapidly. All of those things, and they just reluctant about the impact of what happens if something goes wrong on the rest of my career. That is such an unfair question that they have to manage because it has a different price to their male colleagues. It means that they're missing out on fabulous opportunities, fabulous learning opportunities, fabulous ways for them to make a contribution to companies, because we still treat women and men differently when things get tough.

Helga Svendsen 26:18

This prompts for me thinking about AMP. And I think I've got this right. But all the women on the AMP board stepped down after the impacts of the Royal Commission and none of the men did

Elana Rubin 26:31

And if you have a look at those women, the Chair paid a significant price in a way that her counterparts didn't. And the other female directors, you know, similarly, have been far more low key afterwards. And yet, you know, the men didn't and it's interesting when you have a look at the issue at the moment with AMP capital and the appointment of a new CIO will see you for AMP capital. But there is still, you know, without commenting on the individual because I don't know, you're not his story at all. But the response from the women in AMP says there is something still within the culture that hasn't been addressed.

Helga Svendsen 27:21

Oh, Elana, we could talk for ages, I think. But I know you're on a schedule. So and I you know, aim for about half an hour for these you know, it's the right dog walking period for people to be able to listen to it while they're taking the dogs out. So tell me what what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today.

Elana Rubin 27:44

I'd like to encourage women to follow the things that they're passionate about, I love love things with purpose. That's what organisations that I like to be involved with. We're lucky enough, you know, the cohort that we asked to make choices about our employment. We have choices. We're not in a production line or a manufacturing plant, we have choices. If you've got a choice, make sure that you work with organisations and people that reflect your values. And the other thing I'd like to encourage women to do is just to promote change. We all have a role in promoting change. And no matter what you do, and what level you are in an organisation, or what platform you have, we won't get the sort of environment or society that we want, unless we advocate an act for change. Hmm, our own way. And so I would certainly encourage everyone but particularly women to do that.

Helga Svendsen 28:49

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

Elana Rubin 28:53

You actually asked me that and I read Michelle Obama's book and clearly a woman who has been driven by a strong sense of social justice and a strong belief in participating for change. So, you know, I love that and just a small anecdote that just shocked me in the book. She says that until they came into the White House, there had never been a prominent art piece by an Afro American artist, it's hanging in the collection. And so they changed that. That is the thing. Just those small steps are steps of recognition and respect. And you know, the words we say the actions all mash up, and you know, you just think a young emerging Afro American artist can now look and say, I can be hung in the White House, where a decade before you know, you can't be what you can't see.

Helga Svendsen 29:59

Exactly. The words I was thinking. Oh, thank you so much for your time today, Elana and sharing your wisdom with us.

Elana Rubin 30:06

My pleasure. Thank you for asking.