# Take on Board

Transcript – Tricia Malowney

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Tricia Malowney about diversity, recognising women with a disability for their skills and talents and becoming an ally. First, let me tell you about Trisha. Trisha is President of Women with Disabilities Australia, Director of Scope Australia and a director of Western Health. She has also recently been appointed to the MDIS Independent Advisory Council. The list of boards she's previously been on is long, and it includes being the inaugural president of Disability Services Board, the inaugural Chair of Women with Disabilities Victoria, a director of the Women's Hospital where I was a colleague with Tricia, Deputy Chair of the Victorian Disability Advisory Council director of Women's Health East, Director of Women's Health Victoria. She has a wealth of information and experience that she's going to share with us today. So welcome to the Take On Board Podcast Tricia.

Tricia Malowney 0:58

Thank you and thank you for having me.

Helga Svendsen 1:00

Such a pleasure, as I say, having better colleague with you on the Royal Women's Hospital. And also just knowing you from a whole range of other places, I know that the conversation we're going to have today will be fabulous. So Tricia, before we talk through diversity and recognising women with a disability with for their skills and talents and becoming an ally, I would love to start with digging a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell us a story about young Tricia that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Tricia Malowney 1:31

Young Trisha, that's a long time ago

Helga Svendsen 1:34

I suppose really, I don't want to go too far back. I actually want to talk about how you got into doing what I'm doing now.

Tricia Malowney 1:41

And it was when I was working for Victoria Police and they said to me, will you be the disability liaison officer for Victoria Police and at the time I was working in the equity and diversity unit training police about sexual harassment and discrimination. And I say to them, I don't know anything about disability? And they said to me, you've got one. And I went, Oh, okay. But I've always been mainstream. So oh into mainstream schools, I went to mainstream work. It was an expectation of me that I would be just the same as everybody else. I'm one of 10, which may have influenced how I grew up. So I have six sisters and three brothers, I'm the second in the family, and are often questioned by mother have come at a time when people were regularly institutionalised if I had a disability, how come I wasn't and she always shays, she didn't know what she was doing. I just knew that when they told her to put you in a home and go away and have more children, that it wasn't guaranteed to do that. You said I only heard the second path, not the first part of that having more children. So I have the same expectations of me as the other members of my family. In fact, there's a funny story my my father tells where when my youngest sister who is 28 years younger than me, was in her teenage years, he said, I want to show you a room in our house that you've probably never seen. And he took her into the kitchen. And he said, this is the room where we actually through things like cooking and cleaning. And she just rolled her eyes and said, You said it's never really your walkthrough to get through to the dining room. And he said to her, when Tricia was small, we used to tie her to a chair so she could do the dishes. And she said, You didn't know and I said, Yes, they did. But I wanted to do what everybody else was doing. I had polio, I contracted polio when I was four months old. So I've not known any different. This is me. So wear calipers, and I use crutches to get around. Sitting around the boardroom, you wouldn't know it's only when I get up. That's when the problems come.

Helga Svendsen 4:02

Actually, I'm interested then Tricia that in you know, we are recording this at the start of August. We're both in Melbourne. So we're in stage four restrictions. So although for some months here in Melbourne, and for some months for many people around the world, there is no board table, there is your own desk and your own table at home and a zoom conversation much like the one we're having now. So I mean, I'm interested, you know, in what you just said about, it's only when I get up from the board table. So this period, how has that impacted you good, bad or otherwise?

Tricia Malowney 4:36

Actually, it's been really funny because I have never been busier. Hmm, I have so much work that for somebody who's over 65 and who is in one day mode, I'm now working six days a week.

Helga Svendsen 4:50

I cannot imagine you ever being in wind down mode, Tricia.

Unknown Speaker 4:55

My mother keeps saying to me, you know, people retire at your age and I just think one Oh, would I do that? So just just give me an example of the last 10 days. So Saturday before last, I presented a paper at a conference in Bangalore. Right? That was nice. That evening, I worked with a colleague in London. Then on Monday nights, I took Sunday off. Monday night, I worked again in London. On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I co facilitated training for women on the Pacific Rim with a colleague in London. On Thursday afternoon, I presented a paper at a conference in Indonesia. And in between times, I've been running training program for entrepreneurs with disabilities. So that's been my week. That's 10 days. I worked Saturday night for an hour or so and then Sunday, I had the day off again and Monday starts again. So I can work anywhere now at my board word that's all online, or has been long. So even in the period in Melbourne where we went back to meeting face to face, I didn't. I haven't left the house since March the 13th, which was Friday the 13th, by the way, which is not superstitious, but so I haven't left homes. Interestingly, I'm on the board of Western health. And we have only I think it's four, no three board members who are from the previous board. So they're all new board members, none of them have made it those other two. So it's going to be interesting when they see me face to face. I mean, I never hide my disability. I always disclose it the first time I make people online, I have a disability. And I tell them what it is because I think it's important for people To know that you can have a disability and still be competent. Yes. But it is interesting. If people, then make me, there's always you can see that a little bit of a surprise. Oh, actually, you can't walk. But I still know what I'm talking about. Well, mostly I know what I'm talking about as much as anybody else does. So it is interesting.

Tricia Malowney 7:21

I must admit, as somebody who's generally not the tallest person in the room, that meetings via zoom are a great equalizer for that, because you're all the same height on video. And I do remember years ago, somebody that I had dealt with over the phone quite a bit and then finally I met them. And as I walked in there just kind of looked at me went, Oh, you sound taller on the phone, which I kind of took as a compliment. I guess it's a bit hard to tell. But yes, it's a great equalizer in that way.

It's really quite funny because I'm also quite short. I'm four foot nine and a quarter and don't ever forget my four three So I'm the shortest person in my family and even the children out there. We've got great nieces and nephews, when they get to a certain age, they start coming up and measuring themselves against me and it's usually about seven.

Helga Svendsen 8:12

Well I'm with you, hey Trisha?

Tricia Malowney 8:16

You know, sort of probably somebody you like standing next to, I actually believe that a woman with a disability who I had only met online and back in the days when we used to travel and I used to travel fairly regularly to Cambridge and I would make colleagues and camera and when I met her she had always said to me, she was short and then my measure she was right. Yeah. Probably my hight and I you know, some vandyk quite surprised, but I'm a people my heart other than my colleagues with a concrete Place your portal. Kali. Yeah. So it is, you know, oh, yes, I am sure that you really this is this is an equalizer. And I have been doing Zoom meetings for the last probably three years. So I'm on national boards. And it's not always practical for women with disabilities to travel insolent. I love to travel, but there's complications with not having accessible accommodation. That's always the bane of our lives when you get to a conference and you find out Oh, well actually I can't actually have a shower in this hotel because they booked me one with a bath and no handrails and they think that means exits. So it's those sorts of things. Having zoom meetings for me means I'm saving three hours a day travel. Yeah, I don't have to get up some at some ungodly hour of the morning to go to a meeting that's that's according to I did the other side of the city, which means it's great. I'm saving plenty of money on petrol. And I'm saving plenty of money on shopping because I'm not going here. to the shops. I've started ordering clothes online which I think is a real test of my courage and don't find clothes easy to fit. In fact, because I walk an hour a day so of course which is close which is I'm sorry for the golfers but it's great for me. I had been walking in shoes, though just ordinary shoes and not because of wear caliper shoes are always hard for me to get and my delightful husband took a pair of my shoes to Katmandu and he said my wife needs a pair of walking shoes. And she says so he and the manager sat down and they took my shoes and because I wear an orthotic in the shoe, it needs to be quite deep. And it came back and he looked at my shoes again he went back and they he bought me a pair of shoes that I've put on which fitted straight away, which I have been using every day since for an hour, an hour. For me, too, we're walking shoes. And the rest of the time I'm wearing slippers. And I've never even owned a pair of slippers and he went and found a pair of slippers with the whole, you know, all over the place and found them. So I'm very lucky.

Helga Svendsen 11:15

Oh my goodness. Now Trisha, it's not a board resource, but if you have a link to orthotic slippers, I'm going to get you to share it with us. And I'm going to put that in the show notes because we're all living in slippers these days. And I've actually moved back to wearing my runners because my feet weren't coping very well with being in slippers. So you might need to share that very non governance related resource for us.

Tricia Malowney 11:37

So yeah, I'm happy to share that link.

Helga Svendsen 11:40

So I'm interested we've already touched on some of that, but but today we want to talk about, you know, diversity in the boardroom being a woman with a disability in the boardroom and becoming an ally. What's been your experience in the boardroom, as a woman with a disability.

Tricia Malowney 11:58

One of the things is, I think diversity in the room. Because I have a disability, we can tick that box. But if you look at our boardrooms, they're not really very diverse. They usually what I call not very nicely suits. So they women like me and men like me, who are middle class, professional women, usually white, Anglo Saxon women with housing security, with stable employment in safe spaces. So it's not really diverse. We've all got the same experience. I mean, I'm the diversity because my legs don't work, but I'm really just another woman of privilege. So for me, we need to expand our definition of diverse our agenda is the other diversity, the 5050. Okay, we've got diversity, but we need diversity of thought, as well as diversity of cohort. So we're getting more women of colour and men of colour onto boards, which is great, but sometimes they don't experience disadvantages. Well, how are we making sure that we actually get the right people? So I've just been involved with a member of the disability Leadership Institute. And for them, I have helped to develop some sections, how to get on board, what you need to know, what are transferable skills and how to actually build a board CV. You know, so they think that it's the same as a work CV or an employment CV, but they don't put down the things that they do in collaboration. So I worked for, or I did this and I did that rather than we team have worked together. We have compromised we have collaborated. We have looked at the risk profile. We have worked out how to do this in a different way. And so those are the sort of things I think we need to encourage more. So we certainly need more women on boards. And we need more women who have experienced life in a different way. So we'd like if we talk about the social disadvantage, so I have a friend who's an Aboriginal woman who's deaf. And because she's fair skinned, people should not always accept her as an Aboriginal person, not by the Aboriginal community, but by the mainstream community, but she said because she grew up in an Aboriginal mission so therefore, how are we making sure that we're capturing her experiences in say, a health board or in something that's to do with public health, not necessarily in a hospital setting, but how are we making sure that we're not looking just at surface care? We didn't dig deep into what are the areas of disadvantage that our board could actually explore and how we're doing that. So there's a tendency now to start thinking on paid boards to think about how do we bring the community on the board? Who are our service users? The Who are the people who are using our services, or who have connections to the service to the people who are using our services. So COVID-19, for example, has had as been a great opportunity for connecting to community about what are you experiencing? Yeah. So it's really important that we actually know how to dig deep.

Helga Svendsen 15:42

So from the board's you've been on or even maybe once you haven't been on, what have you seen that works well, and what have you seen when it yeah, when it's working well?

Tricia Malowney 15:51

At the Women's when you and I were there, and we had a disability reference group, which was made up of women with disabilities. Who actually were able to inform the hospital about what they wanted rather than the hospital telling them what they needed. Western Health has a community advisory committee, and we are rejigging it at the moment, but it's made up of people from the community who know the community, and who are unafraid to speak out. And I must admit that the culture at Western Health is fabulous. It really is. It's led by a great team and it's led by a great board who get that you do walk arounds, that you actually get involved in the work of the hospital, not at an operational level, but in knowing what the hospital is, and I think scopes pretty good at doing that. It's another board I'm on where they actually in normal times would go and talk to clients but be invited in to in where people live where they work. We like socialize, and get to know the clients as people rather than as separate from the organization. So, a board isn't just about making sure the books are done properly. The board is also about ensuring that the mission statement is alive. And his operation of life perhaps is a bit awkward, but it's about knowing that what we say we do on our website, and what we say on our fancy board report is actually what's happening on the ground. I know that other directors have followed my lead because I'm I talk to people, that's what I do. So I can talk to the fellow in the coffee shop at the hospital, the same way that I can talk to a patient or to a family member. Just say, hey, you're going and sometimes that brings a response. And so I certainly do that with people with disabilities and I'm well known for being in a hotel and seeing a group of people with a disability and saying to now I'll be back in a minute and just going over and saying hello. People don't talk to people with disabilities.

Helga Svendsen 18:10

Well, well, that's interesting, too. Well, interesting. That's probably not quite the right word for it. That's a little depressing, to be honest. But I but I'd be interested to hear, you know, talking about whether it's people with disabilities in the boardroom or young people in the boardroom or even women in the boardroom or people of color in the boardroom. You don't want to be inverted commas just the person with a disability in a boardroom. You are a member of the board. And I know on boards that I've been on, you know, YWCA Victoria, we had four young women that were equal members of the board. There were young women, but there were equal members of the board. What's your advice to us in the boardroom, about being that strong ally and and I guess, seeing both sides in some way, seeing you as a woman with a disability and as a full board member. What's your advice to us?

Tricia Malowney 19:01

Well, I thought that's an interesting one, isn't it? I think just accept us as people, that we are just the same as you that we've got experience that may be different to yours. Or it may actually be the same as yours, we just don't know. But certainly, I sometimes push my way through to getting allies, but you usually can judge whether you can be the ally, because not everybody can. And don't force it. There are people you'll get on with really well and there are people you won't get on with very well. I actually had one board member explained to me one day she took me aside and explained to me that you have to know about finances to be on board with okay. And I think you do realize this isn't my first board. And just in case I know that those were disability, not for profit. But no, that's fine. I said, you know, you probably need to do the Australians to the company directors course because the responsibilities for a small, not for profit are exactly the same as a ASX company...hmm. So sometimes don't make assumptions about the other person. You may they might not want an ally, they might want to be your ally. But certainly, for those of us in the disability community, we would like people to actually know, we do have knowledge and skills and that's great. But we also have issues that that we'd like you to raise for us as well. An example of that is when I first started doing this many, many years ago, I used to go along to women's sector meetings. The law is a member of the women's sector. And I started saying how is this policy guarantee impact on women with disability, and like, Oh, we hadn't even thought of that. And then I kept saying it. And I was always we're using a great big scooter in those days. So it was quite visible. I packed myself at the front of the room, and political events, whatever, you know, wait, especially around election time, you know, women's of sector would organize event and I'd go along, how was that policy going to impact? I knew I was having an impact myself when other women start to ask a question. Mm hmm. Other women say heck effected in disability have effected in Africa, where the Aboriginal women in the room? Where are the women with disabilities in the word? Yes, those are sometimes some of the questions and, you know, I find myself now that I'm not always the first person to say, is there an accessible bathroom venue? Is the halfway effective in that people with disabilities might need to use our service. So rather than me being always the one to ask the question, if you're not sure Something asked the person with a disability in the room, the woman with a disability is not the one who hide to disability. I always wear dresses when I'm speaking because, you know, I like people to see my calipers, because I want people to know that I'm not ashamed of having a disability and nobody else should be either. But effective for younger women coming up to see somebody else who can be a visible role model, because having a garden up, I didn't know anybody who had a disability when I was growing up. So those sorts of things, just just asking is what can we do to push this issue? Is there a way that we can raise that? What have you asked me what the issues are? That'd be a good one, too. What are you finding so it might be around accessible inflammation, because inflammation is very rarely accessible to disability. There's a great new site actually, which would be worth seeing, which is called our site, and I'll send you the link to that. And it's it's been developed for women with disabilities. It's happened when with disabilities, Australia work. It's funded by the federal government. But it's got information for women with disabilities, about everything from sexual reproductive health to knowing your rights to handling family violence, the whole thing. So it's a good one for people just to get a basic knowledge and a basic understanding the important thing is he came down by and for women with disability, and a range of disabilities. And one thing I'd love to just say that don't underestimate women with cognitive impairments can be your strongest board member because they actually read your papers. And they will say to you, what does that word mean? The third line down fourth word is you actually have to go and find it because because we skim read and know what it's supposed to say we know what the context of a word is. But when somebody says to you, what does that word mean? Like you have to think about it. So that and I bet Got a number of not for profit bullets with women with cognitive impairments, who are brilliant. we underestimate them. And we can return on this thing because they weren't meant to because they've got an intellectual disability or we're required for any injury.

Helga Svendsen 24:16

Hmm, that's interesting. I was talking to a colleague recently and she'd had a stroke and has some cognitive issues. She may well have recovered from it fully now that had some cognitive impairment while she was on a board. And you're absolutely right. What she did was just spend a whole lot longer reading the board papers, processing the board papers, and you know, making sure she was on top of what was going on. If she put the extra time in. She was fully across things. So it wasn't an impairment. So, and no dad noticed different things during that period, I suspect for the warfighter. So it's a great point for sure. And it's another yet another angle on diversity where we should, I believe, say diversity is a strength right? Other than, you know, a deficit model in that way,

Tricia Malowney 25:03

I think a lot of our services have improved, because we are including people with disabilities, from Aboriginal communities, people of colour, because what we've got is a different perspective on life. And look, we all like having people who agree with us that sometimes it's really good to have a disruptive on the board and not a disrupter as in a nuisance, but a disruptive is somebody who makes us think, Well, we've always done it this way. It might not necessarily be the right way. And in the disability community, we have always done it in a particular way. And we are now recognized that that was very wrong, that we kept people safe at home. And we should have had people in the community and as I said, I didn't know anybody with a disability growing up, because people like me were institutionalised.

Helga Svendsen 25:55

Well, kudos to your mother for inverted commas. Not knowing any better Ah, Trisha such a fabulous conversation and so many pearls of wisdom in there. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Tricia Malowney 26:11

Don't underestimate women with disabilities. Seek those women who can expand your board rather than narrow it down to count those who may look different. And think different, because that will benefit your board. And people who understand your business, because quite often, where the problem lies is that we don't have any sector knowledge on their boards typically know their business generally, about our business.

Helga Svendsen 26:46

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

Tricia Malowney 26:52

Absolutely. I'm quite happy to send you copies of the board sections. But also outside. And women with disabilities Australia website has some great resources on there to help you understand the lives of women with disabilities and the challenges they face just a little bit better, which may improve everybody's board knowledge.

Helga Svendsen 27:19

Absolutely. So I'll make sure those links are in the show notes. And I might also given the conversation we've had, I had earlier, done an interview with Rhonda Brighton-Hall, which touched on socio economic diversity in the boardroom and another interview, as well. We've seen a wash around being an ally to Aboriginal women in the boardroom. So I might put a link to those episodes also in the show notes because it touches on some of the topics that we've talked about today. Oh, before we close, Trisha, I would love to hear what's your proudest moment in the boardroom?

Tricia Malowney 27:56

I suppose really, it was transforming Women with Disabilities Victoria, from a feminist collective to home model. So and I suppose one of my proudest moments was hiring Karen, now as our first see, and that was a brilliant choice. So I was the inaugural chair of the board and she was the inaugural see. And it really did bring women with disabilities in Victoria, to a whole new level. Now, it's gone from me as convener to a model that now employs, I think, leading staff. Yeah, of course, the 30 staff doing a whole lot of things around leadership and board opportunities, and more professional and funded. Yes, funding at the beginning and then with funding, and that's really important.

Helga Svendsen 28:55

Fantastic. Well shout out to Karen and all the fabulous work that she has done as well and of course to you Tricia. So, thank you so much for all of your work over the decades really advocating for women with a disability and inclusion and diversity. And thank you for sharing your pearls of wisdom with us today, a take on board acts of being here.

Tricia Malowney 29:17

Thanks. It's been an absolute pleasure and it was fun.