



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 312

Transcript – Dorrit Kromann explores the topic of high-performing boards

Helga Svendsen

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking again with Dorrit Kromann about high performing boards. Now you might remember about a year ago, June, 2024 Dorrit and I had a conversation then and we talked about psychology in the boardroom. We talked about all sorts of things. Things like how she got some voice training from an opera singer and she challenged us to do a little check-in when our attention is wandering in board meetings. So there was a few tools she gave us around that as well. At the time, Dorrit was writing a book and now her book is a reality. So today's conversation, we will touch on high performing boards and all of the beautiful wisdom that she has developed through her book, *Building Bridges in Board Dynamics*.

So folks, before we kick off, as always, I would like to just acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet. For me, I am on the unseated lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I also pay my respects to any First Nations people who may be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connections to land, waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice, treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. And I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now let me reintroduce Dorrit. I know people have heard the summary about her before. She's on a range of boards and indeed I'm embarrassingly not going to name them because I will totally butcher the Danish language and despite my name being Helga Svendsen, I don't speak a word of it, but she's on a range of boards. She's a full-time board professional and investor. And after two decades of building a career linking the professional and human aspects of business, she now holds keep board positions across a whole range of industries. FinTech IT, education and utility services. In addition to driving performance in her own organisations, Dorrit is dedicated to equipping others with the necessary frameworks to understand board dynamics, become high-value board members and creating high performing organisations. So welcome back to the Take on Board podcast, Dorrit.

Dorrit Kromann

Thank you. Thanks a lot. I'm so happy to be here. It's always a good pleasure to talk to you, Helga, because you have this broad view into the board and you big smile as everybody can see now. That's a good start.

Helga Svendsen

Thank you. Well look, we're going to dig into the background at the moment, but do you wanted to give us the quick story about the cover of your book?

Dorrit Kromann

It's actually interesting because I started out, I had this idea about the book and I just wanted all the knowledge I got from making all the mistakes I did and all what we do and sitting back and reflecting on what meetings and so on. I thought if I could give this to somebody on experience, their own experiences on boards is that it's a new language, it's a new land. So I would just like to have that up working in the world. So that's what I started. So I went to one person, she's doing therapy with paintings and I said to her, I want to look at my book with this. So I was with her for a whole day and I did my painting and it was my book.

Helga Svendsen

Oh, that is fantastic.

Dorrit Kromann

It was absolutely amazing. A fantastic day in the sun, not in the nature and back in and just meditating on it. And now the book is here.

Helga Svendsen

I love that. Which is a little bit, if I think about your book kind of almost shining a light, the sun is shining, you are shining a light and meditating on good governance for boards and high performing boards. So to me that comes together beautifully.

Dorrit Kromann

Yeah, that's great. And also I can tell another little story, which is really interesting is that at a certain stage she handed me a colour because you meditate on colours. She handed me a colour, it was gold. And she said, does that resonate with you? And I started doing some drawings with the gold and it turns out that it looks like that the Japanese, when they meant things and they put it together, things that do not stick together, they stick together and make it even more beautiful. So they're so much simple in that painting because it has the colour of gold as well within it.

Helga Svendsen

Oh, I love that too. The art of not just accepting things are broken but making them different and better. And I love a bit of sparkle, bit of silver, bit of gold is always an excellent thing.

Dorrit Kromann

That was the story about when it started, it all really kicked off.

Helga Svendsen

Oh, I love that. That is excellent. Well you know what, I'm going to take those as your background stories. I want to dive in to our topic for today because folks, if you want to hear more about Dorrit's background, you can hear that in her first episode, which speaking of, we'll put a link to that in the show notes. So you might want to listen to both of these together. But Dorrit, as I said at the outset, you have just finished your book, your beautiful book that was just more than just an idea 12 months ago. But an idea in the making, building bridges in board dynamics, be more confident, competent and conscious as a value creating board member. So today we want to talk about high performing boards and drawing on your book. Where should we start?

Dorrit Kromann

So where we should start is where I started is looking out in the world and see that things are changing, politics, everything. And since we met last time, so many things have happened. So what I looked into was a L shape. Now I'm looking out the window and saying I have this and when you look out there, you'll see what you need to do. And what you see is that there's a lot of things going on. It's volatile. So you look at, as I said, the geopolitics, you look at the diverse sports, you look at ESG, you look at war, you look at all these things, which makes it very important to look at the dynamics because everything influences the dynamics. And when I came into the core, the inner part of the board, I saw that a lot of dynamics are happen.

What you can see is that when different people show up, a lot of great different things happen. Both things that will foster very good innovation, but also things that can stall it. And in case you do not look ads these dynamics and don't voice them, they can often store it or you will not be able to grab what is important here and do the innovation and get experience from that innovation. That's really important. So that's how it all started that I started thinking about it. That's where I got to see the dynamics myself also from a lot of people around the world, I've got the same information. I do some podcasts myself as well. I took in for instance, the last one I just put out was about the culture, diversity, how that will influence the board. And I had fi on and she said it's important and I think she said something that is so important because we were talking about colour.

I asked her if I could do that, she's a woman of colour. And I said, so what do you think about this? And she said, well it's difficult for me to talk about it because I'm afraid that I do something wrong. And she said, but if you don't see my colour, you don't see me. And that's the dynamics because you have to see the variety. If you don't see that I'm a woman in a board, how can you benefit from me being a woman on the board? So that's all the things that are really important. Parenthesis, I have a board on my own for the book, which is the most diverse board. You can have young old women from Canada, from Bangladesh, from UK and it's really a diverse board and of course from Denmark, but you have men and women, everything in that board.

And we really explored it after the meeting, not going into so what was diversity but exploring what was going on. So I had to tell this a little example because there was one time where we were missing, there was one the father figure at the board, he was kind of that type. He became that role, but he's really, really not skilled. So he checked out of it, but we talked about it on the board saying what is happening in his role as being a male older than the youngest male. So it's kind of things happening like that in the board and we explored that as well, which was really fruitful. So those are all the things that I've seen. I've taken information from a lot around the world on the board.

Helga Svendsen

I mean diversity on boards is important. Having those strong dynamics is important. And what I heard as I said was strong dynamics to foster high performing boards as opposed to stalling high performing boards. Diversity is one of the things that creates that. It sounds like almost that psychological safety for people to speak up. What are the ingredients that people should be looking for that high performing board?

Dorrit Kromann

Great, because that's really takes the thing to what you can do because you can talk about a lot of times and a long time what is the diversity but getting into it. So what I've been digging into is to use the organisational psychology particularly one it's called, this is hard to say system organisational psychodynamic model. So it's about psychodynamic, it's put in a system and then it's working with the rational and the psychodynamic area.

Helga Svendsen

What was the first one that you said there?

Dorrit Kromann

The goal rational, which means that is, it's where you can see it over the surface and under the surface.

Helga Svendsen

Okay. I'm not afraid to ask the stupid question. I'll always be, what was that word? What does that mean? That's perfect

Dorrit Kromann

Because that helps me explain and it helps me explain in another way of saying over the surface is what the formal role underneath the surface is. The informal roles is just like I talked to you about before on our board that the older man was becoming a father figure. So things like that all what you play out in your family, you can repeat depending on most of the time you do, I had to because I'm the youngest sister and I had to look into how does that affect my position on the board and how I show up,

Helga Svendsen

Show up. Okay, I'm the youngest sister too. Dorrit how does it show up for you? Because it'll show up for me as well.

Dorrit Kromann

Yeah, or it'll not because it all depends on the individual. That's so important for me to say that when I talk about these things over the surface and under the surface when I talk about analysing and all these things, it is a way to look at it. But you as a person, you are who you are, which is so important for me to say. So what it is to be a younger sister is to go into and you always have somebody knowing more because you saw that in your childhood you were born into somebody knowing more. I mean my own two children I have and they're six years apart. So the youngest one, he's always had three parents. But then it takes a lot of effort to do the individualisation when you're a teenager. So at a certain stage you have to stand up and say, now I'm an adult as well as you and I get knowledge in another direction because it's not only about life knowledge, but if you don't check out on that, you'll keep on being the little sister.

And if you keep on being the little sister, you'll always seek acknowledgement and go into the board and that's away. So a little bit further, I have so many good stories. I was in 2001, I took top manager programme, educational programme for top managers and see that's many years ago. So the group of psychologists that was on the programme running the program, they were saying this is really particular because you are all not the firstborn. And usually what we have seen in all the researchers has been that it was mostly first born. So we were this special group that were different. It was really interesting. So what I think has changing now is that we come in as individuals, it takes 25 years and more to try and take in people as one person instead of your youngest. And you have to do that yourself as well.

Show up with confidence and competence when you show up in the board and you have to know what you want to do when you get on the board because that's also one of my, really it's important. When I took the first board position and when I was 18, I had no idea of what

it was. I was just, well I had to run this and I'll do that. It was a co-op, it was protected by the law, which meant that it was okay be an amateur. But anyhow, I didn't know. And today I see people that do not know that when you are on a board you are accountable, you are financial liable. So if you don't take on this and you don't look at your position, if you don't look at the board and analyse that before you enter, you can be in a, you're not to swear but in a asshole really bad place, right? Because you can really be down and where all the dirt is and you cannot get out of it. We have today, just recently that that was bored, which is both, it's owned by the municipality but it's a private company. The board was just somebody is putting a lawsuit on them. What do you call that

Helga Svendsen

When you're being sued?

Dorrit Kromann

Exactly. You're being sued. Yeah. So what we have right now, and then it's just recently a board that's owned by the municipality but it's a private company but the board is being sued personally. So that's something you really have to be careful about to choose your right decisions. So that's one of my points in the beginning of, so a lot of stories, I can talk about all these around the world, but going back to what you asked me was about how can you work with this? So for me it's taking the model.

Helga Svendsen

Maybe we'll just put a picture of the model in the show notes. Those are on video, you might get to see it and Dawn's about to talk us through. So tell us about the model.

Dorrit Kromann

This is the model in a very simple drawing. It's from coming from a song that developed this when I was studying master in my master of organisational psychology. It's about the iceberg. It's about what? What's over the surface and what is under the surface as we just talked about the boundaries and so on. So use that model to get into all parts of the board. So going on from that, so this is just a way to kind of look at the board, but going from that, you can go into your own personal psychology and you can go into the group psychology. So on your own side, what is important to know is that I actually just talked to you about. One is the transference that whatever you experience at the childhood, you can transfer and replay that into the board as it's right now or any place in the world.

That's what we do as human beings. For the other thing is the projection. If I get into a room, and this is really where you get the psychological roles, I have to say, I have a disclaimer here. Everything I say is being put in black and white because it's so much more complicated. I have to say that. And that goes for my book as well. In order to explain, you have to be a little bit black and white. But getting into this, if you have these roles, you have the projections where people probably know about projections. So in the boardroom what happens is if you get into the board, you have just been out in a meeting that was terrible, it

was financial crisis and you come into the boardroom, you are angry because you were not hurt, you didn't hear people and it was really a terrible place to be.

So if you are angry and you are in the old days, women I think maybe still, but we were brought up as being good girls. So anger is nothing you get into so suppressing that, but it has to come out. Could be projecting your anger onto somebody else, which means that somebody else is actually playing out that part. And you can see that maybe we do that here on the podcast here on the show is that if everybody think about going back in an organisation, think about who is in that group. You can have a group of five or something when you sit in that team, think about a meeting and think about the person that is always angry. Think about the person that's always complaining, think about the person that will always be the tearing up. Think about these roles. The reason for that is our projections into that. So I've seen it. We know working on, working on, did you try that all out there? Maybe you can instead of me, maybe I just take a little, just two seconds to let people just make feel it. Do you have these roles?

Let's go on. I know I'm not giving enough time, but I think you can do it. So what I experienced once was when you train this, you go into what we call a process study group where the only thing you do there is talk about your feelings, thoughts, and fantasies in the group as they are here now, no subject, no nothing. So you really get to explore. And there was one time, one guy, he was saying to me, oh I get so angry with you and I dunno why. And then I was kind of, woo, what did I do? What did I say? And then after 10 minutes he came back voicing in the group, just sitting around the, not without table but just sitting around. And then he said, do I know now why I get angry at you? It's because you put me into contact with my own vulnerability and I don't want that. He gave me a gift then because he really said to me what I experienced that that's what's happening. So people can tend to be angry

Helga Svendsen

And that amazing gift to himself as well. I'm thinking, so here's how I'm feeling self interrogation. Why am I feeling this way? Oh, the thought behind it is I'm feeling vulnerable. I don't want to feel vulnerable, I want to feel strong and confident or whatever. So being able to dig behind that, wow, well done him on doing that digging and then articulating it as well. That's pretty impressive.

Dorrit Kromann

This is maybe 15 years ago and I really cherish this with my heart that you said that because coming back to what you bring onto the board, I was mentalizing on that and I used that in the board when people have a go at me, because unfortunately I experienced that some people suddenly get a go on me personally. So then I go back and say, well what is my part of it? What is it I bring to the table and I mentalize on my own intentions. Then I go back and look at what are their intentions and then I can react. Of course it's very difficult because in the moment sometimes I've just been, I remember one meeting where I said, this is not how

to talk to me, but it was out of affectionate and it came like that. Maybe if I'd had a little bit more time grounded myself in thinking what is his intention? What is wrong with him in this particular situation? It turned out that he was really put a pressure on him because he had a very important meeting and the meeting was striking out. So that's how it works.

Helga Svendsen

Put yourself in their shoes and do a little bit of self-examination. I mean we've all had, I'm sure I certainly have had people in the workplace, in the boardroom all over the place that trigger me for reasons that are way more about me than about them. But it takes a while to get to that point. So at the start it might be, oh that person is so annoying then oh that person is annoying me, me. Which is different to them being annoying. And then why am I feeling annoyed? Oh, it's actually about something that I'm doing or something about me. Interesting.

Dorrit Kromann

And the last thing, it can be something you just have together that is why do this is the yin and yang. So suddenly you come together because that person will react what you were expecting. So you'll push the buttons. As I say to people, you have pin codes to people. You can trigger everybody with feelings you don't like to have on your own or express on your own. So that's a lot about the personal stuff. You can even go deeper into it. So being a non therapist, you can go so deep into it, going back to your childhood traumas for the first six years of your life where you really, if your needs were not met, then you'll start developing survival mechanisms. So that's going really deep. But I'm not saying that should be done on the board. And which is really important for me is that the board has one task that's to work on the company and that's on the primary task is to make sure that this company is run in the right way, both on giving return, on equity return and even the soft equity is an NGO.

And then it's to make sure that the organisation is working. So you have, I call it a double role despite it being, it could be the same, but if you're selling a company, you might have to not look at the best interest of the organisation because it's the shareholders. So you have some kind of doubleness in the board, but you have to look in if you have a crisis during COVID, it does not help a lot. If you start sitting around, as we say in Denmark in the hippie way and just reflect on what's going people dying. You have to act. So you have to be like our prime minister. She was really, really, it's been not yelled at, but people have been mad at her because she had been so strict. But we actually came out of COVID in a really good way. So that is so important to acknowledge that on the board you have a task and the soft parts, if things are stalling in a crisis, go and check out your dynamics.

If they're not, I think you should just go ahead and handle that crisis. It's so important. And then you can deal with it afterwards, talk about what happened. So that's important for yourself and for the group, which is the other part of it, some group dynamic as well going

on. We unify the board, how the board is working down into the organisation. You would amaze yourself if you took a look out like Lumen is looking at the system, one of the looking at the system and you would amaze yourself if you could see what's actually going on.

Helga Svendsen

Well it's kind of the role of the board, isn't it, to get up on the balcony as they say, or the helicopter view or whatever it may be. It's that getting up and being able to see that when you're in it, you're not necessarily able to see it. And I think part of what I'm hearing here about that high performing board is that it's both individual reflection and performance and awareness and as well as that obviously that group awareness, performance, all of that sort of thing. So how they all come together, which I'm sure all that and more is explored in your amazing book Dorrit. I know we've only touched on some of the things here, but what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Dorrit Kromann

First of all, to all of you out there, I think it's really important that you know what you're doing when you're getting on a board. Look at the landscape, look at whatever you can get of information. If you can't get, talk to the chair before you get on the board. I had turned down roles because I couldn't get onto the, it was a public announced job and I said, well, if I can't get in touch with you, forget about it. So understand your role, understand your landscape, understand the finances. Make sure that you know what is the values. If you can't agree with the values on the board, look at everything about the board, the company, the NGO or whatever you get into. That's one thing. The other thing is you can analyse the board also when they have the first board meeting going underneath the surface.

Look at all the soft roles. Of course the first one, you can prepare all the hard roles. Look at the primary task. Are we working on the primary task or is the group just waiting for Messiahs? Because that's one of the group when you go into basic assumption group. So work on that, look at it, feel what's going on and make yourself spend just a couple of seconds during the meeting, maybe after each item in the agenda, where are you? Ground yourself, feel your feet so you understand where you are and get to know yourself, look at your whole life and say, what is it that actually drives me? And then on the group dynamics, I think it's so important that you go deeper. We never even another one, because we didn't go into the group dynamics with, as I just said, how group works.

But there's so much more to look into that understand the group dynamics. We actually working on the task. What is the purpose? Do we still everybody align to the purpose and so on. All the biases and all that. So many things to get into. And the last thing, which is my new chapter, because what I'm doing is that I have the book, it takes a long time to do the print and the editing and all that. So what I'm doing now is I have my website and I add on chapters throughout the year from now on. And the next chapter is about mentalization. And mentalizing on the boards is about what I just talked to you about. In other words, it's

about understanding your own intention, understanding other people's intention, understand the group intention. And this could be who am I? Did I come from that meeting?

Who's he? Is he waiting to get onto another meeting? So he's really put a pressure on him and he doesn't want to get into questions. Is the group afraid because they just had the CEO just stopped. So we don't know what to do. So the group can go into or the chairman is not there anymore. The fatherly figure is not there anymore. We have a maternal, we were looking for a maternal figure. Is that the anxiety in the group that will just say, what should we do? So getting into that and using Mentalization and be good at that and you can practise that. And that's what I'm getting into in the next part of my work here.

Helga Svendsen

That in some ways answers my next question, which is about a resource for the Take on Board community. I'm hearing there's two there. One is your book building *Bridges in Board Dynamics*, and secondly on your website. The updates as they come as well are some resources that will be really helpful for the Take on Board community.

Dorrit Kromann

You can call me because as you can hear, I can speak for hours on this and I love to help people and this is the whole dynamic for me is that I like to help people to get, that's why I'm a coach as well and I coach board members.

Helga Svendsen

Oh well I can tell that because you have been incredibly helpful to the Take on Board community through these conversations. So Dorrit, thank you yet again for coming back and sharing more of your wisdom for writing the book. I know it's only just been launched, published, whatever, it's a couple of weeks ago, so that is fantastic. We will make sure there is a link in the show notes to that. So folks go and have a look at it and have a look at DOT's website both for the book and for the updates. Oh, thank you so much for coming back and sharing a bit more of your wisdom with the Take on Board community.

Dorrit Kromann

Thank you. And it's been such a pleasure. As I'm saying your smile and the way that we talk, it just feels you make it a safe place to be here. It's really, and that is what it's all about, to be able to show your uncertainty in a safe place. So thank you for doing that.

Helga Svendsen

It's a pleasure as always.

Transcribed by Rev