


Take on Board Podcast – Episode 381

# Transcript – Helga goes solo: Respectful disagreement in the boardroom

Hello, and welcome to the Take on Board podcast. I'm your host, Helga Svendsen. I know that being on a board can be an incredibly valuable, interesting, and exciting experience. Yet, it can also be lonely, challenging, and let's face it, pretty hard. So here at Take on Board, I'll bring you weekly tips, tricks, and advice to help navigate your way onto your first board, your next board, or to build your governance wisdom. Now, on with the show.

Hi, folks. This week on the Take on Board podcast, you'll be hearing from me and my thoughts around, well, respectful disagreement.

The thinking for this for me was prompted around the awful, I'm going to say, incident with Helen Haines. Everyone in Australia will know what I am talking about there, but if you are an international listener or watcher of the podcast, Helen Haines is an independent politician here in Australia. And there was, again, I will say, incident, uh, with her last week where somebody- rammed her with the car. It was a terrible incident. She was in a critical condition for some time. She is now more stable, but she has lost both of her legs.

Now, I'm calling it an incident rather than an attack, even though that is often how it is, has been described because whilst charges have been laid, I don't think it's at all clear what on earth was going on there. Just today, I have read in the paper that the person who did it says that it was an accident, and he panicked. There is way more to come out. I don't want to go into any of those details there, but it's devastating. Clearly a devastating impact for Helen, who has now lost both of her legs.

And regardless of the reason why and the deliberateness or otherwise of it, what it has prompted in Australia is a discussion around respectful engagement and respectful disagreement, and turning the heat down in some of our political conversations. And what I want to talk about here is how that might impact the boardroom, and how we can keep the heat up and be respectful at the same time. This is not just something that we need to talk about in the political sphere, it is something that we all need to talk about, is how to disagree respectfully. So that's the context of where my thinking is at for this conversation with me today.

So, in my humble opinion, boardrooms, like just about anywhere, are a place where robust and respectful debate needs to happen. Boards are not discharging their duties around, you know, exercising due care and diligence and effective oversight and all of those things unless they are able to bring all of those diverse views and have the conversations. So we definitely don't need artificial

harmony. I'll talk about that more in a minute. We definitely don't need things just being all nice. We need robust conversations.

So I wanted to talk about a couple of frameworks. I'm sure I will have talked about some of these before. The first one is psychological safety. Many of you will have heard of Amy Edmondson Don't know if this is how I should describe her, but the queen of psychological safety and how important psychological safety is in just about every format.

Her early work was around health services and the health sector, and how having a, an environment where people felt safe to speak up led to less incidents, health adverse outcomes in the health sector environment. So that is the same in just about everywhere, and again, same in boardrooms. We need to feel safe to speak up. We need to feel able to share our views on things without thinking we will be cut down or that people will just agree with us for the sake of it.

So psychological safety is not just warm and fuzzy. It's not just agreeing with each other. It's definitely not just agreeing with each other. And you can measure these things, and you can put in place- Ways of improving the psychological safety in your boardroom. You can measure it, and you can put in place ways to focus on those areas that might need some assistance.

I know I've talked about this before, uh, using the Team Excel tool, which is administered by an organisation called Data Drives Insight. I've done a couple of podcasts about this before. I'll link them in the show notes. Just know that for your board, if for whatever reason you're not feeling like there is robust conversations or you're not feeling like there is the psychological safety either for you or for potentially for others, there are ways that you can measure and act on it.

Now, the sorts of things that are measured are things like, referring to notes, welcoming new ideas. Are new ideas welcomed or shouted down? Information flow. Are you getting the right information? Are you getting too much information? Are you getting not enough information? Always a challenge for boards.

Work-life balance is one of the things that is looked at, and don't think just because boards only meet once a month or whatever it may be that work-life balance is not an issue. Does your board meet in the evenings? Does that suit everyone? Does it meet early in the mornings? Does that suit everyone? Does it meet during the day? Does that suit everyone? How long are the board meetings? In what format are the board meetings? All of those sorts of things impact work-life balance, and it's not just something for the people who work in the business, it's for the board members as well.

Sharing ideas. Do you actually hear new ideas from others? If not, why not? Accepted for differences. I know I've said this before, diverse groups make better decisions if an inclusive environment exists, and that inclusive environment will be around being accepted for differences. So are people accepted for their differences?

Are we able to make mistakes? Do we have an experimental mindset where mistakes are okay? Now, obviously, in a health sector environment, we don't want to make mistakes, and in fact, in lots of environments, we don't want to make mistakes. We want to be able to, you know, have in place good processes where that is minimised. But if it happens, calling it out, recognising it, is it okay?

Is there a growing sense of autonomy? Do we feel included and connected? I'm sure I've talked about this before on the podcast. Board members, again, only come together irregularly. So are there other ways of building connection of board members? One of the boards I'm on, we now have a very informal lunch before board meetings. Whoever shows up, shows up, and it's just a chance to have a yarn, to build that connection.

Other things, there is a long list, so I might just work my way through it. Job satisfaction. I've said before, you can't be on a board if you don't love what the organisation does and love what you do. So do people get satisfaction? That builds psychological safety.

Is there job security? Phew. May or may not be on the board that you're on. Are you getting to utilise your skills and knowledge, and is everybody else in that boardroom able to utilise their skills and knowledge?

Do people feel, do you feel, do others on your board feel they can ask for help? Do you feel, and do others feel respected, and do you display respect for others? Do you listen? Do you listen? Do others in your boardroom listen? That obviously builds psychological safety.

Is there connecting with the team for a common goal? Are you really clear what the goal of the organisation is, and do you connect with others around that? Are you committed to the plan? All very key around strategic planning.

Is there genuine care displayed? Is there role clarity and expectations? Are priorities determined in the workload? Is praise given both to the executive chairman, to other board members when things are done well? Do we call it out on the strengths and the really good things that are happening?

Is workload manageable? Do we understand the value of mistakes? Back to the mistakes stuff. Do they happen? They happen. Do we know the value of that? Can we learn from that? Is trust built? Is effort and reward built in? Is it an ideas-friendly culture?

All of these things build psychological safety. All of these things should in some way show up in the boardroom and in your boardroom, so that we can encourage this robust debate, this healthy debate, where disagreement can be constructive and can be lauded as a good thing. It is a good thing. Disagreement is good as long as it is done in a robust and respectful way. It's not just for the political world, it is for boardrooms as well.

Now, the second framework I wanted to touch on in this regard, and again, I know we'll have talked about this before because it's one of my favourites, Kim Scott's Radical Candour framework.

For those watching on video, it's one of those four quadrant things. Let's do the lines first. At the top, care deeply. At the bottom- You don't care. Let's just put it that way. The left to right, on the left-hand side is indirect communication or no communication, and on the right side is direct communication.

So her framework, top right corner, care deeply, direct communication, that is radical candour. That's what we should be aiming for. Yes, we care deeply, and we will just say what we think.

Top left-hand side, care deeply, not direct communication, is what Kim Scott calls ruinous empathy. I'm sure people may have seen examples of this in some places, even in the boardroom, where

people just a- agree for the sake of it, basically, and they don't give that direct feedback because they want to be nice, because they care a bit too deeply perhaps, or just need to dial up the direct feedback loop.

On the other side, where you give direct feedback but don't care deeply, it's what Kim Scott calls obnoxious aggression. I'm sure some of you will have seen that in the boardroom as well, where people are just direct and straight and, "I just tell it how it is," says the person, and it's sometimes a little bit too direct, or maybe not too direct but just not caring enough.

So the radical candour framework is an excellent one for us to think about, again, in terms of this respectful and robust communication, not just for the political world, not just for the community world, it's for our boardrooms as well.

What can we do to dial up the care deeply so that we can stay in the, um, radical candour framework? What can we do to dial up direct feedback so we can stay in that radical candour quadrant? So that's the second one for you to consider.

Now, I also very briefly just wanted to reflect on a conversation I had with a client just this week. She is a leader in an organisation. She has the most beautiful approach to her leadership. It is, I think, absolutely a radical candour approach. She calls out the good things when people have done the good things. She calls it out in a beautifully direct, caring deeply way when she thinks that there is something that needs a bit of attention.

Let's just say she's had a few challenges recently, and the conversation that I had with her was around whether... You know, she was like, "Helga, is this really possible? Is this the way people lead? Do I have to change my leadership? Because I don't want to," she said. "This is my way of leading. This is my values-based way of leading."

It is absolutely radical candour or any version of that. That version of leading where you care deeply, where it is values-based, and you can give direct feedback is an excellent way of leading. Do not change your way if that is your way. Get the world around you to change to your way, rather than the other way around.

So I just wanted to recognise that in people. It is hard. In fact, she said, she reflected, "You know, if this is not the right way to do things, I don't want to do it any other way." And she said, "But it'd be so much easier if I could just tell people what to do." You know, obnoxious aggression. Be so much easier to say, "No, this is what you must do." But it's not the way to get positive change and impact in our boardrooms, in our executive rooms, whatever it may be.

So folks, let me just wrap it up. Boardrooms, just like the world, need to have respectful debate, need to be robust debates. We all have a responsibility in that. There are various frameworks that we can use, whether it's psychological safety, whether it's radical candour, whether it's something else that works for you. But we all have a role in it, and we need to think about how that might be showing up in our boardrooms or not.

If we think artificial harmony is at play, what can we do to dial up that direct feedback? What can we do for respectful debate? What can we do to separate hostility from the debate so we are constructive? And how can we combine high care with direct challenge?

So folks, I would love to hear what you're doing in your boardroom, what you've observed in your boardroom, what works well for that robust, truly inclusive debate, what might not be working well, and what you might be doing about it.

So folks, that's it from me this week. I can't finish without drawing it back to Helen Haines and wishing all of you who know her or know of her just my deepest thoughts. And I know that her husband, Phil Haines, in the press conference that was done from Bayside Health, asked us all to donate to Save the Children on her behalf, so I'll make sure there is a link to that in the show notes.

All right, folks, get on out there. Robust, respectful debate. I'd love to hear from you how you're going.

And speaking of robust, respectful debate, it occurs to me I have not done the acknowledgement of country for today, so let me do that.

I record this podcast on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to the land, waters, skies, culture, and country.

I support Voice, Treaty, and Truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

See you next week

So that's a wrap for the Take on Board podcast today. Thank you for being here and for being part of the community. I do this podcast because I love bringing good women and gender-diverse peoples together.

So I invite you to join us over in the Take on Board Facebook group, an active group that helps, supports, and cheer squads each other. Just search Take on Board in Facebook to find us.

Or you might like to let me know your email address, and you'll then have the Take on Board times and the Take on Board community's digest delivered straight to your inbox. You'll also get advance notice of events and programs so you can meet others in the community.

Finally, I'd really love it if you could do some of the podcast things. Share this podcast with someone you know who you think might get some value from it. Subscribe if you haven't already, either on podcast or over on YouTube, and I also love it when people rate and review.

Thanks again for being part of the Take on Board community. Now go and put these tips, tricks, and advice into action so you can be your best in the boardroom

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