

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 383

Transcript – Helga goes solo: End-of-Year Board Check-Ins: A Simple Framework for Chairs and Directors

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, I'm recording this on the 12th of November. You will be hearing about it in a, another week or so when it goes to air, and it's starting to feel like the end of the year, which means as a chair of a board, and I'm sure for many of you out there who are either chairing boards, chairing committees, or, heavy inverted commas, just on a board, you're starting to get into that kind of end of year wrap.

So today's episode is about those end of year check-ins. What I will be doing as a chair of a board, and what you might want to do, whether it's as a chair of a board, chair of a committee, or as a board member.

Before I start that conversation today, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I record. For me, I am on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and I pay my respects to Elders past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to 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.

Folks, with that, let's dive on into the topic then, shall we? As I say, it is November. I am recording this in November 2026, and I am the chair of a board, and I have just started my end of year check-ins.

Now, I became the chair of that board a year ago in October 2025, so it kinda makes sense to do the check-ins 12 months into my chairpersonship. But it also, I think, makes sense to check in with people at least once a year, and I don't know, for my brain, it makes sense to do that towards the end of the year.

I'm not going to tell you the ins and outs of the conversations that I have been having. That would not be appropriate. But I will say, I started the conversations yesterday. I've got another one today. They're all very informal, mostly over lunch, but might be over, you know, but informal and not really with any set agenda, although I do think it is worth having a few things in mind that you want to check in about, but also just leaving the space open for board directors to give any feedback that they might have.

But also, sometimes it's a check-in if someone seems a little disengaged, it is a good opportunity to do so. So it's great on all counts, I think.

Now, you know I love a good framework, so I have a little bit of a framework that I keep in the back of my mind for these conversations. The framework that I use is, you know, there's four pillars, for want of a better word: looking inward, what's that person's experience; looking around, what's happening either in the boardroom or in the sector or whatever it may be; looking forward, what's coming next; and finally, looking up, feedback for me.

So let's step through each of those elements.

First up, let's look at the director's experience looking inward. So the sorts of things I like to explore with directors there are things like, how are you feeling about your contribution? How are you feeling about workload? How are you feeling about professional development, what you're doing, what you might like to do?

So what I'm looking for there is that the balance is right in terms of the workload, in terms of contribution, in terms of engagement. I'm looking for, and they might be looking for as well, or I might be looking for on those boards where I'm not the chair, where I'm underutilised, where I've got some skills that I might be able to contribute or give more of.

And I guess I'm also looking for if there's any lack of clarity about what they might be contributing or not contributing or where they could or couldn't, whatever it may be. Maybe a lack of clarity even around committee charters, committee contributions, those sorts of things.

So they're the sorts of things I'm looking for, whether it's this year with my check-ins or in other years. Sometimes I hear, you know, the meetings need to be a bit longer. Sometimes I hear the meetings need to be a bit less long, prompting me to go around the table and make sure we get everyone's contribution. They're the sorts of things I'd be looking for there in terms of the looking inward.

The next step, I don't always do these in any order whatsoever, looking around. Looking around the boardroom, although I think it's not just the boardroom.

So what is happening or not happening in the boardroom that we need to talk about? This might be about psychological safety. You know I always love talking about that and checking in about it. It might be about dominant voices or less engaged voices. It might be about, are we rubber-stamping things that really should be explored a little bit more than, heavy inverted commas, just a rubber stamp?

Uh, are we spending enough time on strategy or too much time on strategy? Enough time on risk? Not enough on compliance? Not enough those sorts of things. Are we getting into the operational weeds?

Now, I think it's worth definitely talking to directors about these sorts of things, but also checking in with the CEO. Uh, so for us, we have just done our board evaluation. This year we did an internal board evaluation. The executive responds to that as well, and I then have a further follow-up conversation with the CEO about the executive's feedback.

So she has a conversation with the executive, and then there's a bit of a, you know, there's the doing of the survey, but a more informal check-in. So what are we seeing when we look around the boardroom?

I think it's also worth, when we're thinking about looking around, what is happening in the sector? Uh, whatever that may be for you. So what is happening around when we j- when we just look around us?

The third prompt, I guess, for the conversation is looking forward. Boards need to do this all the time. Uh, so things you might check in on here, what keeps you awake at night? What strategic concerns might you have? What risk concerns might you have?

I always think of risk and strategy are two sides of the same coin, so what might be our strategic opportunities? What might be our greatest risks? Where are we in the strategic cycle? Are we reviewing it? Are we coming towards the end of a strategy, looking forward to what's coming next? Those sorts of things.

So looking forward, what's next on the horizons? What might be the big-ticket items for us? What might be keeping us awake at night? Those sorts of things.

And then finally, and again, might not be in order, how am I doing? Uh, feedback for the chair. That's looking up. I don't think of the boardroom as a particular hierarchy, so I don't know that looking up is necessarily the right frame.

But what are your suggestions for me about what I could do differently as chair to make your job as a director easier, to make our boardroom more effective? They don't need to be big things. They might be small things. What's working for you? What's not working for you? What could we, what could we do differently?

I, again, like to get this feedback both from board directors and from at least the CEO, but the CEO filtering the executive feedback as well.

I also know that some of the things that we put in place in the boardroom may not work for everybody. So just because one person doesn't like it or one person does want something done differently, it doesn't mean that will necessarily happen. That is part of my role as chair, I guess, to filter some of those things so the boardroom as a whole is working well. Uh, but hearing that sort of stuff is gold. It is invaluable for a board chair.

Now, some of the things that might be a bit trickier to navigate in some of these annual check-ups, there might be some feedback you need to give a particular director, or indeed it might be trickier for you to hear some of the feedback that directors are giving you as the chair.

But chairs, I think, need to call out any underperformance that they are seeing. They need to call out any dynamics in the boardroom that aren't working as well as they could be. I would say call it out and explore. There could be excellent reasons for it. There could be a whole range of reasons.

I've certainly known for myself as a director, but also when I've had conversations with other directors, we're all human. We have things happening in our life. Sometimes people are a little less engaged than they normally are because life is getting in the way.

Now, we still need to discharge our duties. We still need to make sure we are, you know, engaging to some extent, and if things are getting so in the way that you can't discharge your duties, then take a leave of absence. But I think, you know, understanding what's going on in the director's world can be really useful in that regard and having an open conversation about it.

I also think it's important for these conversations to close the loop, so as in go back to people about what you've heard and what might change. Now, again, for the board that I'm on, the board that I chair, we have just done our board evaluation. We will be having a conversation about that at the December board meeting, so the conversations that I'm having here will feed into that.

I also do a written chair's report each board meeting, so some of the themes might feed in. I mean, I'm not going to be saying in that I had a conversation with Person X about calling this behaviour out or their engagement or whatever it may be. Not that that's happening at my board because they're all awesome, of course. But some of the themes might go into either my chair's report or into the conversation that we have about the board evaluation.

Finally, I'd say it's also worth doing an annual check-in about succession planning, whether that person's coming up to their end of term or not, but I definitely think it's worth checking in.

Where are you at in your term? Uh, if another term is open to you, if you're not at maximum term, is that on your radar? Are you expecting that you will put your hat back in the ring or not? Just so everybody knows what is going on. I think that's really useful.

Ah, one other thing I should add to it, the other thing I think that is worth checking in is committees. What are the committees of the board? How is that operating? Not just the boardroom, but the committee room, and what are your thoughts around your current committee membership? Is that what you want to continue? Is that what you want to change? And so on. I think that is a really useful one to touch off on as well.

So folks, annual check-ins, I think they're super important. They're not a formal performance review or anything like that. They are a check-in to ensure the boardroom is operating as, you know, effectively as it can do.

I think these check-ins can be done pretty informally. It could be a walk and talk. It could be an over lunch. Could be just a catch-up over the phone if needs be, whatever it may be.

But chairs, I really encourage you to do so, and board members, if your chair doesn't do it, maybe just make a time with them. “Hey, it's coming to the end of the year. I've been thinking about where things are at on my radar, and I'd love to just do a check-in with you,” and maybe suggest to them that they might like to do it with other board members.

Okay, folks, um, let me know how it goes. If you are the chair of a board, if you've got any other suggestions or frameworks that you use, I would love to hear it. If you're a board director and you've prompted it with the chair of your board, let us know how that goes. Join in the conversation and let us know.

Thanks so much for being here, folks, and I look forward to s- seeing you next week on the Take on Board podcast. Bye for now.

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 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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