

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 262



Transcript – Abby Hunt knows psychologically safe boardrooms are more effective boardrooms

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Abby hunt about psychological safety in the boardroom to enhance board effectiveness.

Before we start the podcast today I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me I'm on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I also acknowledge any First Nations people who may be listening today. 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 and I encourage others in the take onboard community to do the same.

Now let me tell you about Abby. Abby is on the board of DataDrivesInsight.com. Abby is a leadership coach and psychologist with over 20 years experience working as a trusted adviser to a range of sectors including health care, local government and not for profits. Starting her career in the EAP that's employee assistance programs, and critical incident counselling space. Abby has experienced firsthand the devastating consequences of poor psychological safety at work. Forever changed by this gut wrenching work, Abby was committed to tackling both individual behaviour and systemic practices to create psychologically safe teams and working relationships. Abby co founded DataDrivesInsight with long term colleagues and is committed to using empirical data to inform meaningful change. Now a seasoned presenter and facilitator, Abby represents DDI at speaking engagements across the country, sharing insights from their research in a practical and thought provoking way, which is exactly what she's going to do for us today. So welcome to the take on board podcast, Abby.

Abby Hunt 1:43

Thank you so much for having me.

Helga Svendsen 1:45

It is awesome to have you here. Sidenote, Abby and I met at Kathy Mackenzie's Fire Up Coaching conference in Melbourne, oh, gosh, a couple of months ago and talked about, we happen to be sitting opposite each other at the table and talked about what she does. And I'm like, okay, Abby, we've got to sort this out and get you on the podcast. So it is awesome to have you here. And whilst I'm very keen to talk about psychological safety in the boardroom, and how that enhances board effectiveness. As always, before we get started on that conversation, I'd like to dig a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me a story about young Abby that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Abby Hunt 2:22

Absolutely. So I've probably have a little bit of a unique story in the sense that my mum and my dad and I are originally from the US. And so I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, until I was about seven, almost eight years old. My parents divorced when I was about three. And as time went on my mum remarried an Australian. And that meant that I was able to come over to Australia and start a life over in Australia with my mum. And what that meant was I would go back three times a year to see my dad for holidays, and to catch up with him in a nice close relationship with my dad. But what was interesting was that I would fly back on my own, unaccompanied minor, three times a year, from the age of seven, right through to when I was obviously 18. At that point, I only saw him probably once or twice a year. But the challenge for me was at a young age sitting next to random people on the plane. And a lot of time people wouldn't want to talk to you. I kind of learned at a young age to start making conversation because back then it was about a 36 hour flight to go and see to see my dad back in the States. And so yeah, I would talk to people and start conversations. And it was always amazing to me how much people would actually share with me. So I became quite fascinated with people at a young age. And I liked you know, people watching and wondering what was happening for them, etc. But I suppose a big activating event for me was in the lead up to moving to Australia, which I didn't really connect with this until I was quite a bit older doing my own kind of work. And I remember one weekend, my dad coming to pick me up, as he usually did. And I got in the car and I sat in my little car seat and and my dad wouldn't talk to me he was in a really interesting, I don't know if it was well, I know now it was in a very, very hurt space, very sad space. But I sit down, why won't you talk to me and my stepmum turned around and she said because of what you said to that social worker, you're going to be moving to Australia and you're not going to see your dad very often and you have broken, you've broken his heart. And for me that that activating event, which I have no hold no negativity towards my father or stepmother at all for that. But that really solidified in me this moment of don't speak up. Don't share, don't be too open with people because you might hurt them. So that started me on that journey of as I did my own work growing up. Wow, there's so much that people feel and think that they don't say in the attempt to try and keep themselves safe and others safe and that really epitomize work though. do now.

Helga Svendsen 5:00

Wow, that is so interesting. And they are both stories. I mean, they're connected. But both stories that explained so much about what you do because you hurt your dad. Oh, okay. What I learned from that is don't speak up, keep him safe, keep me safe. Let's not say anything so interesting. And it's, I think sometimes people think about psychological safety, I've more into in a moment, but it's like this special magical thing. But it's actually really simple in some ways as well.

Abby Hunt 5:29

Yeah, just the ability to feel like it's okay to just speak up. Without that fear of am I going to hurt someone? Am I going to hurt myself, I'm going to make matters worse, when we're quite, in conditioned to biting our tongues. And certainly, I've seen it on boards as well.

Helga Svendsen 5:44

Even though that story of seven year old Abby on the plains and making conversation, it sounds to me like you were the adults there half the time trying to be adult and make these conversations with the person you're sitting next to. Even though I'd love to hear more about seven year old, eight year old, etc, eight year old me on the plane. Let's dive into that part. So you've, at DataDrivesInsight, you've created this tool, which measures psychological safety. So I'll get you to tell us a little bit more about that in a minute. And then let's dive into how you've used it. Because for me, I'm always interested in how boards can use different tools, and you've used it with your board. But first up, can you give us the what is psychological safety? And why is it important? And then what is the tool? And then we'll dive into how boards can use it.

Abby Hunt 6:33

So in my kind of definition of what psychological safety is, it is that true belief that I can speak up, I can take an interpersonal risk with the people that I engage with, whether it's friends, family, whether it's people on boards, whether it's teams, whoever it might be, so is it safe for me to speak up and share ideas, concerns, issues without the fear of being humiliated, blamed or criticized. And so that is like the definition, I suppose from my view of what psychological safety is. That's why it's so hard.

Helga Svendsen 7:06

Yes, that's right.

Abby Hunt 7:08

And the other thing, just to kind of put in there, I suppose, is that a lot of times people are talking about psychosocial risk. And we hear that interchangeably with psychological safety. And so when it comes to measuring both in the tool that we've created, I think it's useful to just kind of just share the distinction, because I still hear a lot of people using them interchangeably. And I think your previous Julia, I think it was who you did a podcast with a couple of months ago. And she talked about psychosocial risk. So if we look at psychosocial risks, their work conditions that are in the environment that might be having an impact on our satisfaction at work. So it will be things like is the job clear? Is it clear what my boss or what the organization is expecting of me? If I'm a board member, what is it clearly understood? What I need to fulfill in this role? Is there a sense of security in the role? Is there isolation? Is there a sense of my well being looked after? So those are some kind of examples of psychosocial risks that if we don't have them, then it leads to us feeling quite concerned about our role. But having psychosocial mitigation strategies in play, so even if we're feeling like our psychosocial safety is intact, it doesn't lead to high performance. What we require is the psychological safety element, which is that true sense that I can be myself, I can ask questions, I can ask for help. I can resolve conflicts, I can innovate and raise new ideas. So just to talk about those kinds of distinctions. I think it's important.

So the background of why we develop the tool is simply because for years and years, and I think you mentioned in my introduction, we would do a lot around working with teams in particular, after there'd been a critical incident. So there might have been a death in the workplace due to a workplace accident, and there could have also been death of a colleague through suicide. And so that conversation that we would often have with teams following such a tragedy, you would hear things such as, "I knew something wasn't quite safe with that piece of equipment", or "Johnno had been working a double shift. And he'd been burning the candles at both ends, but we didn't feel like we could raise that with management." So it was always based around fear. If I speak up, I'm going to lose my job. If I speak up, I'm going to put a target on my own back. And so we've been measuring psychological safety for years in like the yearly kind of annual surveys. But by that point, things have already happened throughout the year. So my colleagues and I thought we need to create something that's going to measure psychological safety regularly throughout the year, in a way that's not too invasive, and it's not too time consuming. So we developed the PSI which is the Psychological Safety and Inclusivity Indicator, which is simply a three minute indicator that is filled by the each employee based on how psychologically safe they feel within the team that they're working with. And so if we think about from a board perspective, we will measure the board's psychological safety, as well as the psychosocial risks that might be playing out or influencing psychological safety. And we can measure that in a snapshot within almost instantaneously within three minutes. And so we'll know straight away, and the team will know straight away what the areas of focus need to be. So it brings the invisible visible, which is something that allows the team to work on.

Helga Svendsen 10:44

I love bringing the invisible visible and immediacy like that point about, yeah, we've done our annual culture survey or whatever it may be. That's all well and good. But that gives you and by the time the results come out, you know, that's giving you a line in the sand of nine months ago, or whatever it may be, but not where things are at now. And presumably not where things are at, in also different teams in different parts of the organization. Absolutely.

Abby Hunt 11:10

So when I think about from a board using it themselves, but it's also about recognising the board are responsible for making sure that psychologically, that employees are psychologically safe and working with minimal psychosocial risk. So the high level data that the board can get of knowing where to which team lie in terms of these ratings and what do we need to do to put in mitigation strategies?

Helga Svendsen 11:35

Yes. Which is even interesting and of itself, because knowing that about the organization, sometimes data can be used in not the most constructive ways by boards or executive teams or others, where it's like, oh, well, what's going on in Team B, there's some psychosocial risks there, someone better go and fix it. And make sure that doesn't happen anymore, which of course, just quells feedback, and you don't, because you don't have the psychological safety about actually fixing it. So it's good for boards, good for the executive, I think to also say the board is using it. So they know whether they're safe in raising things. So how does that work in practice? Like, what is it? How does it work? Tell me about you use it in your boardroom? How does it work in practice?

Abby Hunt 12:18

So we measure, we use the indicator monthly, because we have monthly board meetings. And it's a useful measure for us because we work very closely together, and we have a lot of interaction with each other. However, you still don't always know what people are thinking and feeling. Because you're relying on people actually being open with you. And we can't always assure that, and one of the things we talk about is artificial harmony. It's a great terminology that if everyone can kind of relate to I think it's the belief that it's safer for me to just, on the surface, pretend that everything's okay. Rather than get into some of those trickier, harder conversations. So unfortunately, without official harmony, the consequences or the cost of it is performance, and satisfaction, and innovation, and all of those things that we want in a high performing board or team. So like, every board, if artificial harmony is normal, then we as data drives insight would potentially fall into that category every now and again. So we thought, well, let's measure it. And let's do it as a regular practice. So we're tracking really well as a board. And our measures were quite high every month. And one month, we did the pulse. And it came back as having a bigger gap around reward and recognition.

Now not so much in terms of am I getting better pay and things like that with this was more around is the effort that I'm putting in equal to the reward that I'm getting out. And so quite a big gap was coming up in that stage. And so it opens up a conversation. And that's the beauty of this indicator. It's used at a team or a group level. So for us as a board, we saw the results. And we went Hmm, I wonder what's going on here. And it opened up a conversation for people to be real about what they were feeling. So people are going oh, I just feel like I am working my finger to the bone with very little outcome. Or I'm feeling as though we might be working on many different things. And we need to come back to the common purpose. What it also one of the things that we also recognize that we're aligned to a common goal, the gap was a bit wider there. And so in that conversation, it made us realize that we were working on different goals. And so that was leading to the level of frustration and therefore this kind of why are we working so hard with very little return? Well, it turns out we're working on we had very different understanding of what the common goal was. So it made us go back and get really clear on what that was so that we can then Get into action. And that's what we did. And then we were measured again next month. And sure enough, those results are lifted. Now, one of the things that we've developed with the psi indicator is micro learnings that are attached to that. So one of the times that we were doing the indicator, our results came out that connection, connection between board members was a little bit higher than usual the gap. And so it leads you to do a little micro learning, and I'm talking like 5-10 minute micro learning. And it's all built around neuro psychology. So it goes straight to the heart of the matter. It kind of says, for me, and I can talk about my own personal experience, those who are in your board, have you not connected with as often as you normally do? And for me, I went oh, I know exactly who that is. And my rationale was this board members just had a baby. So give him a bit of time to readjust to that. And don't bother him with work issues. But in doing that, that led to him actually feeling a bit disconnected from me and from the whole group. And so when I realized that I reached out to him and I went, Hey, I just realized I've been making this meaning that maybe I need to leave you alone. I said, I'm so glad you said that, because I've been feeling a bit disconnected. So you see it brings the invisible, visible, and you're able to kind of sort it out pretty quickly.

Helga Svendsen 16:21

Wow. Yeah, you can see from both of the examples, they are both kind of real examples that you've shown how it does make the invisible visible. And it's so interesting that even sometimes when you work in the space like you do, still using the tool, you go, Oh, it's over there, right. Got it. That's where we should be going where we should be putting our energies. So in a really practical sense, you say you use it monthly, like what is it an app? How does it actually do people do it before the board meeting? Is it after the board meeting? I think you said before that it's really quick. It's only a couple of questions. But that doesn't work.

Abby Hunt 16:56

You can use it any way you like. So it is on an app. And it's also on a portal. So you can you can dial into that or sign up to that on your computer. But the app works great, it's able to give you a little notification a little nudge to say it's time to fill in your indicator. And you can set that either monthly,

you can set it quarterly, and you can set it for every six months, I really recommend doing it more often than every six months. Because then we get into that kind of trap of doing the yearly surveys when things are already happening and when things have already festered. So a more regular reading is recommended. A nudge on your on your app to say time to fill it in, you will fill it in, it's only open for about 24 or 48 hours. Because psychological safety is static, it's always changing. So you can have a really tight cohesive group in the morning, and then you know, something happens and throughout the day, and there's a conflict, it might lower the rating in the afternoon. So it's not about we must be perfect and high all the time and psychological safety. It's about being real. It's going oh, we've dropped why? And having a conversation about that.

Helga Svendsen 18:07

The results of it...so everybody does their pulse check, does everybody like does the chair then say, Oh, look, connection is down or purpose? Or whatever it may be? Or does everybody get to see the results? How does it work?

Abby Hunt 18:19

Yeah, everyone says the result is nothing hidden. So if you've probably heard of Amy Edmondson, she's the guru of psychological safety over in Harvard. And we've just teamed up with Amy and she's going to be using all of our data to analyse a lot more from she has dinner much data from Australia. So she's quite keen to see what we've got. And now she developed this concept around psychological safety, particularly in in healthcare. So her hypothesis was, people with high psychological safety will have less errors, and less hazards, she found the opposite, because of course, when you feel safe to present and to declare I've made a mistake, then we're going to have a lot more errors. And that creates this learning environment where we're not blamed, we're in fact, rewarded. We're going great to know that that is that that was happening. Let's find solutions. So we took that research and her knowledge and develop the psi based on teams. So for example, I could be involved in a number of boards. So my psychological safety in one board might be very different to what it is in another. So same way in organizations Team A might have very high psychological safety, but their interactions with team be a very different. So PSI, it measures your own level of safety and psychosocial risk in your own team but also in interfacing teams. So we're able to see what kind of blockers are present interdepartmental as well.

Helga Svendsen 19:46

As been said earlier for boards, it's great for boards to measure and know about where they stand and take the actions and the micro learnings and so on. And this oversight role in the organization particularly if there is high cycle logical safety overall, that is fantastic to be able to see within different teams perhaps, where there might be challenges, whether that's just for that lead, whether it's for the executive team, whether it's for the board, because it's key, because like you're saying health, my words, not Amy Edmondson is, but my reading of it is that it's not that more mistakes are

happening in those health services that have psychological safety, you just know about them. So you can act on them, as opposed to being brushed under the carpet and nobody mentioning those things. So it's important to know about it. Yes, spot on, spot on. So that's how it's worked in your board. And some really practical examples, which again, it's so fascinating, you know, you're an organization that works in psychological safety. So some might say, Oh, well, it's always going to be perfect. But even in an organization that specializes in that you're like, oh, it's given us some indicators of where we need to do some tweaking to improve things. What have you seen with others? Have you got any other example? Well, in as much detail as you're able to share, because obviously, these things can be difficult to share, but in as much detail as you can share? Are there any other examples that you're able to share with other boards that have used this tool and what it might have meant for them?

Abby Hunt 21:07

Yeah, I think there's initially been more of a focus on boards wanting to encourage their executives and their teams using it. But I find that once sports actually experience it themselves, because it's done in a non-threatening way, and everyone is involved in seeing the results, it's just had such a beautiful benefit. Because it allows for one, the invisible become visible, it allows for open conversation and dialogue. So it allows the leaders or the chair in this instance, to be part of the result, but also part of the solution. And I think, when that's clear for people, there's less of this is not about an individual, it's about us as a group. So when I've used it with other boards, I can give you some examples of I would say most boards probably operate around a five out of 10, in terms of psychological safety. And part of the rationale for that is when we are seen as experts that imposter syndrome often creeps in. So when we kind of strip it back a little bit and the invisible becomes visible, there's a lot of people going, I feel like I need to prove myself in this role. But I don't necessarily want to share that be that open with people. But the fascinating thing is, once people start to one person shows a little bit of vulnerability, it opens the doors for others. So working with one particular board, and that sense of connection was very low. So we talked about what is that about? And took, you know, brave soul to be a little bit risky to kind of say, oh, I don't really know, I don't really feel like I know, know, you all well. And we talked about what are the cons and the pros of that particular view of holding our cards close to our chest. And when people kind of connected with if we operate like that, then the performance is going to be capped. I'll give you another example of working with a board where they were very happy with their level of diversity on their board. So we're very proud of the genders, the cultural backgrounds etc. Very, very proud of that. However, the psychological safety score was very low, it's around about a three. And it's something that I'm seeing across a lot of teams at the moment as well in organizations where there could be a strong focus on diversity. But unfortunately, without psychological safety, diversity alone, it doesn't create high performance. So with this board, we focused a lot on building psychological safety based on the indicator, and what the results were telling them. And they decided to focus on one area only initially, which was built connection. So not saying it's what every board would do. But they made it their mission to have one on ones with each person and take them to a little bit of a deeper level, not just about Korea, not just about expertise, but around really getting to know people a little bit better. And that went a long way for them.

Helga Svendsen 24:11

That is so like... I'm hearing connection come up a bit there. And I think for boards, it is interesting because you spend a couple of hours together once a month, often that's it. It's not like an executive team that works together, day in day out or other teams that work together day in day out. So it is I think it isn't a particularly interesting one for boards and hear it take on board people will know we talk about diversity, equity and inclusion quite a bit. And that reflection about was thinking before when you're talking about artificial harmony and also about diversity is that if you don't have that psychological safety, you might have diversity, but you won't have inclusion and those robust conversations. And in fact, some of the research shows that when you get diversity in a group, the conversations get harder, not easier. So you really need that psychological safety and connection to ensure that they are robust, constructive, inclusive conversations. So I can see how this would be really helpful. And I love that it's just the regular nature of it. It's like, right, let's check in, where are we at what is there to do and the micro learning, it's just anyway, I know, folks, it'll sound like I'm doing an advertisement for it. But it does sound it does sound really interesting. And in fact, full disclosure, I have just, this wasn't the case. When I first met Abby, we had just talked about this the lineup conversation, but since then, I've looked into it more. And I will be doing my accreditation in this tool, because it just sounds such a really useful thing for boards to know.

Abby Hunt 25:36

I'm glad that you've joined the learning because it's I'm working with a lot of different organizations across industries that are starting to wake up to the notion that there's a compliance measure that they need to need to follow. And even if boards are looking at just through the lens of compliance, and that's a great, that's a great starting place. I guarantee when you adopt the indicator, and people are using it regularly, I guarantee you will see the productivity and the innovation, you'll see those things rise. Because there's you know, if you imagine taking away that level of interference that says don't say something in case you sound silly, or I'll put this forward, and I'm wrong, my head's on the line. If we took away that level of interference and just felt safer to go, Look, you know what this might be a crazy idea, but I want to put it out there. Or look, I feel really strongly about this. And I know it's not what the rest of you might think. But I'd like to us to explore it, if you're open to it, we're not conditioned to always have those conversations. And if there's something that I'm doing, that might be limiting other people from having that voice than I want to know, a lot of it comes from our own meaning making though we created ourselves. So when we unlock that it's beautiful.

Helga Svendsen 26:53

Abby, so much in here that it's that's going to be a value to boards. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Abby Hunt 27:02

Yeah, I think big thing is measurement is critical. That old saying we've got to measure something to move it, especially with psychological safety, because it's invisible, we can't see it. So this will make the invisible visible, and give us something to work with. Give the team something to work with and the board something to work with. The other thing, I suppose would be recognizing that artificial harmony is normal. So whilst it's normal, it's not conducive to a high performing organization or team. So we need to recognize that speaking up, and taking risks with each other is a hard thing to do. And if we work on it together as a group, it can work beautifully. And I think the other part of it is, by using the PSI measure or any particular other measure that may be out there, finding the solution, or putting the solution back into the hands of the people that are part of the group. So, so many times, and I'm guilty of this, and we would do yearly cultural surveys of boards and, and of teams. And you know, the results would go back to people and culture HR or back to the board. Result and the solutions are individual. So we have to put those solutions back into the hands of the individuals at all levels. So hence why we created this tech version. Because it is low cost and it and it just reaches everyone rather than just certain levels.

Helga Svendsen 28:34

Yeah, so good to do and it does make everybody responsible for it not, I'll see we're not a psychological safety team. What are you going to do about it? Like, what are we going to do about it? Because it's a responsibility for everyone here. So is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Abby Hunt 28:50

Look, I encourage everyone to go to the DataDrivesInsights.com website and I'm really happy to share any other materials or product information sheets, I'd recommend just having a look at the psi it relates to any, any group, any board. And if people would like to reach out and contact me directly, I'm more than happy to have a chat as well. Fantastic.

Helga Svendsen 29:12

So we'll make sure there's a link to DDI in the show notes and obviously, your LinkedIn and so on so people can get in touch if needs be. Oh, thank you, Abby. so valuable. I'm so glad we sat opposite each other at that conference. That was a beautiful, beautiful little phage there to have a conversation about these sorts of things that I think is so important to make the world a better place, which means are important for boards to get across them as well. So thank you for being open to having this conversation. And thank you for all that you've done in terms of creating the tool as well. So yeah, thank you for joining us here today.

Abby Hunt 29:46

Thank you so much.

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