

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 287



Transcript – Beth Ellen Holiman discusses bringing feminist governance into the boardroom

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Beth Ellen Holimon about feminist governance.

Helga Svendsen 0:06

Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we 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 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, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Helga Svendsen 0:37

Now, let me tell you about Beth Ellen. Beth Ellen is on the boards of feminist leadership hub, a community advisory board, and also on the board of the collateral repair project. As founder and CEO of the Hive Collective, Beth Ellen leads a consortium of thought leaders dedicated to advancing connective and inclusive leadership, participative planning and values based Board Governance. She believes that organizations reach their highest aspirations when board's fundraising and operations are transparent, respectful, empathetic and courageous, and she applies this philosophy to every aspect of her work. Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast, Beth Ellen.

Beth Ellen Holimon 1:16

Thank you, Helga. I'm so excited to finally be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:20

It is so, so good to have you. So Beth Ellen, before we dig into feminist governance, which I am so looking forward to this conversation, but before we go there, as always, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me what was your earliest experience of governance?

Beth Ellen Holimon 1:37

Oh, my goodness, it was as a very young and new executive director of a home for abused children, an emergency shelter for abused children, and I was a brand new, 28 year old executive director, and I had this board, and I had no idea what to do with them. I just, I had no understanding of what purpose they served. So I learned fast.

Helga Svendsen 2:08

So you were reporting to the board. Is that how that one worked?

Beth Ellen Holimon 2:11

Yes

Helga Svendsen 2:12

You learned fast. How, how did you work it out? You know, you come in, you're working to this board. You're like, who are you? What do you do? How did that come together.

Beth Ellen Holimon 2:20

Well, I remember asking the board chair at the first board meeting like, do I vote, and is there information that you're supposed to give me? Like I had no, you know, I had no idea where the bylaws were or what they were, so they just kept handing me things and I, fortunately, the board members were very patient with me, but I eventually found a mentor. And he was actually a big fan of the Carver Policy Governance model, and he was really pushing me to use that, and I really went the board source, at least in the US, it is called the board source, board governance approach.

Helga Svendsen 3:06

Okay, how did your board cope with that? So you come in and go, first up, who are you and what do you do? And then you come back and go, oh, I've got this model and framework that I'd like to put in place. Were they happy about that a little bit. How did that go?

Beth Ellen Holimon 3:22

They were very excited to have some structure and clear approaches to where we were headed, and start to put policies in place and understanding that it protects the organization, it protects the employees. I think we were all just really happy to put policies in place?

Helga Svendsen 3:42

Yeah, I mean, it is to keep I would say a key part of governance is having that framework and approach. So it's probably a great segue to our conversation today. So the Feminist Leadership Hub, where you are on their community advisory board, has recently developed the feminist governance guide, so it seemed like a perfect opportunity to have you on the podcast so we could talk all things feminist governance. So where should we start the conversation?

Beth Ellen Holimon 4:13

I think that it's really interesting how we all came together with the people who designed the governance guide came together in Berlin as part of the fair share for women conference. That's an organization that was founded by Helen Wolf and another co founder, has an incredible group of people involved in there.

Beth Ellen Holimon 4:39

One of the mandates that they had was to create a community for people to come together and start to talk about how to implement feminist leadership, and then also these ideas of what's the difference between feminist leadership and feminist governance came up.

Beth Ellen Holimon 4:56

So they selected people from around the world, Greece, India, Brazil. I'm from the US several countries, and we all came together and met for two days straight, sort of deciding what kind of guide that we wanted to provide for this group of people in the feminist leadership hub.

Beth Ellen Holimon 5:19

And we spent a lot of time discussing the difference between feminist leadership and feminist governance, and we finally decided on the idea that for the purposes of what we were doing, it's that feminist leadership is more about the individual and feminist governance is more about the systems in place within an organization.

Helga Svendsen 5:45

Well, that's interesting and boards, of course, I would say, are about, you know, the systems in place in an organization much like you reflected in your organization. It's like, what is our framework, what are our processes, what are our policies?

Beth Ellen Holimon 5:57

Right, right? Yes, interestingly, that for most of the people involved, feminist governance does not specifically apply to board so the tool or the guide itself really looks at an organization as a whole system, and I think many of the premises and values apply to board governance, but I think that that's important to know that it's not specifically about board governance.

Helga Svendsen 6:27

Yeah, okay. And I think, I mean, often the term governance is used, I mean, I've heard it used more broadly, you know, people talking about program governance or project governance, or it's this, I don't know the technical definition. I'll have to look that up, what the technical definition of governance is, but I would think it's around the structures and processes and frameworks you have in place to ensure the kind of successful implementation of whatever it is the project, program or organization, and the board has oversight of that.

Beth Ellen Holimon 6:56

Yes, so, this guide focuses on organizational structure, policies, decision making, risk, funding and finance. Those are the big buckets that we looked at. Then we developed. We each sort of wrote our own areas and then edited and came back together. But we also went back to the community at various points and said, tell us stories of governance. Tell us what you want to be included. And now, I think we all see it as a guide that will hopefully develop and iterate over time as people try some of the suggestions in here and come back to us and say, this works better if you do this, and we can really make it evolve and make it a community guide that's created from the community. So this is just really the first iteration of it.

Helga Svendsen 7:54

Amazing. Okay, so, I mean, like I say, those areas that are covered in the guide that you just talked about, you know, values, org structures, policies and processes, decision making, risk, funding and finance. I mean, they're all key board matters where the governance is described just as boards, or whether it's more broadly. What are some of the key things that the Take on Board community

might need to know about some of these principles, like, should we dive into each one of them, or are they some overarching principles? What's the best way of looking at this?

Beth Ellen Holimon 8:27

Well, I really like to start with why we even have to develop something like feminist board governance, which is going back to colonialism and in the US, every country has the colonists that they can go back and source their original board governance from.

Beth Ellen Holimon 8:50

For us, it was John Winthrop who wrote this speech called "A Model of Christian Charity", and it connected this idea of philanthropy is for the purpose of making sure that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor, but we're going to be generous and make sure that the poor aren't too poor, but we're going to make sure that they stay poor.

Beth Ellen Holimon 9:16

That's basically what the speech said, and so for us, that's where our whole philanthropic, board governance, organizational governance standards came from, and so we need to have a feminist framework to re conceptualise how to deal with power in boards and the power differential between boards and the people who work in the organizations and the people who are participants in whatever the organization is offering. And because we are still in the US, at least, we're still using the same system that started in 1639, I mean, it's, it's astounding to me how nothing has really changed.

Helga Svendsen 10:09

I love the starting with the why, like, why do we need to possibly turn this on its head? What is governance actually about? What is the why? It's interesting. You know, that's where the US started. You've come together this advisory committee that brought together this whole guide is from all over the world. So there would have been similar stories from everywhere about the basis of governance in their countries. Are they similar stories that you were hearing? Is there a Winthrop everywhere? And if not, how did you align that into this guide, then?

Beth Ellen Holimon 10:41

If here is a board system in organizations within a country, there's some kind of John Winthrop story there, because that's where men in power were put in place to make sure that no systems changed in the overall idea of power and resource distribution.

Helga Svendsen 11:07

So then I can see why the feminist governance handbook is more broad than boards. It's about organizations as a whole, because I think what I'm hearing, in some ways, is the whole foundation of the way boards, the way governance is set up through boards, is flawed, in a way. Is that what I'm hearing?

Beth Ellen Holimon 11:29

Yes, it's flawed. And so we, I think we started at this really great place with there's an organization in the Philippines called Angat Bayi and their purpose is to get women and power changing candidates in their political system, and they created the 7c framework of feminist governance, which means that we need to be critical and understanding inequality and power contextual, looking at specific contexts, connected, looking at our decision making processes and consultative, making sure that it's inclusive, caring, which the caring part I want to say, I think is very specific to feminist governance. I've worked on other types of governance, participative governance, collective governance, and injecting this idea of caring, I think, is really the one piece that makes it different from those other types of governance, but the other C's are collective and creative. But caring is a really interesting and I think important part that distinguishes feminist governance. That's

Helga Svendsen 12:58

Interesting, that the caring one of the, I think there's seven C's, is there seven? Yes, there is the caring part of the seven C's. You see that as a definitive thing, almost for an organization and boards....distinguishing. So how have you seen that show up in board work? How do boards in practice? How do boards implement caring? Or how have you seen it in your board experience?

Beth Ellen Holimon 13:28

I think that if you're thinking about the way that you're making a decision, and the board is thinking about a way they're making a decision, it's about saying is this kind first? I mean, yes, you have to protect the organization. Yes, you have fiscal responsibility. But is this kind and is this caring? There's a feminist organization out there that decided not to provide, the board decided not to provide employees parental leave, because it's just astounding, you know. And if they were really practicing feminist governance, then they would have said, is this caring? Is this consistent with our values? And I think that that really is a distinguishing part of feminist governance.

Helga Svendsen 14:21

So can I slightly devil's advocate you here, I'm wondering, how does it balance out with sustainable funding and finance? Because I imagine, for some organizations, they say we would love to care

more. We just can't afford it, and our mission is around whatever, like, sorry, I shouldn't dismissively say whatever. It's not absolutely what I mean. But you know, if we are providing support for women in need or providing support for children or for the environment or for whatever that organization does, purpose led organizations, how do you balance those things out?

Beth Ellen Holimon 14:54

I think the big difference here, it's the difference between a scarcity and an abundance. Mindset, and that when boards are in a scarcity mindset, and they are making all their decisions out of fear of the future and not really assessing more of what they have and more of the resources that exist for them right there that are so much more than their financial resources.

Beth Ellen Holimon 15:22

What do all of the employees have to offer? What do all of the participants have to offer? What are the different ways that we can do things so that we can live our values? That's really the difference.

Helga Svendsen 15:40

What are some practical tips for boards?

Helga Svendsen 15:43

People are listening to this. They're either on boards or thinking about joining boards, other than obviously going and picking up this practical guide and having a look at it and for them, reflecting on how it can be implemented in their organization, whether it's the 7c or the areas. And, you know, looking at some of the case studies. So, I mean, I think definitely picking up the guide and having a look at it and a read through and how it might be applied in your own organization. Actually, maybe let's do it this way. How have you applied either the 7c or the principles that are talked about in your board work?

Beth Ellen Holimon 16:17

Yeah, sure. The way that I work with boards is I make sure that the organizational values are really clear. But what I find with boards in the US is sure there are organizational values, but the boards don't think that those values really apply to them. They think that it applies to the way that the people doing the work they need to use those values, but the most important part of the values is really defining, what are the behaviours that match those values? And so if a board needs to look at the values and say, what are all the ways that we ensure that we're making decisions with integrity.

Beth Ellen Holimon 17:03

Integrity is such a common value that organizations use, but they don't ever say this is what integrity looks like on the board, and really connect it back to the value. And so then I make sure that they're looking at their bylaws from a values lens. I make sure that they're looking at their policies through a values lens, that their agendas are seen through a values lens. Everything like, okay, let's talk about one of the values in our meetings. Where could we apply this differently or better or deeper, and really having that be some of their generative conversation that they should be having, instead of having reports read to them.

Helga Svendsen 17:50

It's so interesting, isn't it? I often likewise, you know, working with boards, whether it's strategy or board evaluation works or whatever, what is the purpose of the organization? What are the values? How are those values showing up in the boardroom? It's so key, and you're right. Some boards are totally across it. Oh, yeah, here's how we do it. Others are like, Well, what's that got to do with us?

Beth Ellen Holimon 18:11

I have yet to really work with a board that is already like, yeah, we've got this. We're doing this interesting. Wow, but that's probably why I'm working with them.

Helga Svendsen 18:24

So that's exactly right. You know, if they've got this, they've got it, they don't need you, right, right? And that values, in some ways, it connects to the care side as well, that you talked about before as one of the distinguishing features of feminist governance as well is building in that care.

Beth Ellen Holimon 18:43

Yeah, and I think the other piece for feminist governance, feminist board governance, is really looking at the relationship between the staff and the board, and how can that be more of a partnership, instead of this over relationship, and believe me, I've been an executive director of many organizations.

Beth Ellen Holimon 19:07

I understand how important it is for boards to govern and for staff to focus on operations and never the twain shall meet, right? But I think that there, when we go too far with that, that's where we really start to feel this relationship of power over and so I don't really have an answer for it. I think

it's something that has to be constantly examined, and I'm encouraging boards to innovate and to look at board best practices.

Beth Ellen Holimon 19:49

I'm starting to say best practices are where innovation goes to die. So I want you to look at these best practices that honestly. Really have not changed in 20 years. And to say, how can we do this better? What are some ways that we can tweak them so that we are more consultative with the staff of the organization? And maybe there's... how can we have a grey middle where we're really working together?

Beth Ellen Holimon 20:25

I know there's the idea that we have board members who are working on committees, and that's where the work is done and staff is there, and that structure might be able to sort of overcome that barrier. But I see a lot of times that's not happening. It's just not happening, and that relationship is not there. So I'm not sure exactly what the answer is.

Beth Ellen Holimon 20:55

Well, the answer to me is we need innovation in the way that boards function with the staff and obviously with the people that they're trying to serve. There needs to be different ways to interact.

Helga Svendsen 21:13

It's rethinking the whole fabric and the whole basis on of how organizations are pulled together, rethinking the whole Winthrop world into a feminist governance world.

Helga Svendsen 21:24

Beth Ellen, there is so much in here, and I really encourage people to have a look at the guide, because there is so much in there as well. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Beth Ellen Holimon 21:37

I think that best practices need to be questioned, and that if you do begin to innovate, really start to run it like an experiment.

Beth Ellen Holimon 21:49

So it's tracked, you're evaluating it as you iterate. You're tracking why you are changing, what you are changing, because otherwise it just becomes this loosey, goosey thing and it will become a mess.

Beth Ellen Holimon 22:05

So when I'm talking about innovation, I'm talking about really saying as a board, we're making a very clear decision. We're going to try this new thing, and we're going to track it and see how we can change it over time.

Beth Ellen Holimon 22:24

I have had boards say, well, we're innovative. Well, show me how you're innovative. And they can't really describe it, because they're not really innovative. You know, they just have these loose ideas that they think that they're practicing.

Beth Ellen Holimon 22:39

So that is something that I want people to take away, and then also that feminist governance is very much worth looking into for any board. It does not need to be an organization that is focused on women. It does not need to be a feminist organization, but feminist governance is a way of disrupting power, and that can be applied to any organization.

Beth Ellen Holimon 23:12

You know, one of the things that as a Gen X or I really had a hard time understanding, because I was the oldest of this group of women at the very beginning, they said, well, we have to take gender out of it. And I was just flabbergasted at first, I just didn't understand why and they were really saying, we need to take identity out of this. This isn't about identity. This is about power. So that's what this tool is. It's about power. It's about disrupting power. So it's, I think, very much applies to boards and organizations of any mission.

Helga Svendsen 23:56

Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community.

Beth Ellen Holimon 24:01

Yes, there is, please go to the Feminist Leadership Hub. It's feminist leadership hub.com and you can sign up for free. It's through mighty network. So you may be in another mighty network, but you would just join and it's a growing community.

Beth Ellen Holimon 24:20

It's very international, I would say, actually, there's very few American people in it, but we're really trying to get not just people who identify as women, we're trying to get everybody to be a part of it and really look at feminist leadership and feminist governance as a broader lens through which to see the world.

Helga Svendsen 24:48

We will make sure we put a link to that in the show notes as well. They often have events and community catch up, so we might also folks keep an eye on the Take on Board, Facebook group. Maybe what we'll do is for one of those that suits the Australian time, although I know not all of the Take on Board people are in Australia, but we might all find one that we can all go to together, so we might make sure that happens as well.

Helga Svendsen 25:11

Oh, Beth Ellen, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing some of your wisdom and experience around feminist governance and this fabulous resource for people, it's so valuable to do and, yeah, it's a real thought starter in a whole range of ways for people to think about how this can be implemented in their organizations. So thank you so much for coming and sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

Beth Ellen Holimon 25:36

Thank you so much. I've really enjoyed talking with you, Helga.

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