

## Take on Board Podcast – Episode 183

# Transcript – Christina Ryan



Helga Svendsen 0:00

I would like to start in the spirit of reconciliation and on behalf of the Take on Board community, acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land. I am on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present, and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, sea and community. I also extend that respect to any First Nations people we might have listening to our podcast today. So today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Christina Ryan on diversity and inclusion in the boardroom. First, let me tell you about Christina. Christina is on the board of the National Disability Research Partnership working group, and was previously on the boards of Canberra rape crisis center, sexual health and family planning, ACT, Northside Community Services, Disability Advocacy Network of Australia, women with disabilities ICT and have a lock housing association, quite the least. In 2016, Christina took one of the most radical steps in her long career of activism and change making. She put the two words disability and leadership into the same sentence. Her next step was founding The Disability Leadership Institute. We'll find out more about this in our discussion today. So welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Christina.

Christina Ryan 1:23

Thank you, how are you? Great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:26

It is awesome to be here. And I cannot wait to hear our conversation, hear more. But before we do that, as always, we'd love to dig a little bit deeper about the guests we have on. So I'm wondering, can you tell me Where were your parents born? And you know where your ancestors are from?

Christina Ryan 1:44

Yes, I do. My father was born on Gadigal land in Sydney. And so it was his mother. He's second generation on third generation Gadigal land I was also born there. My mother was born on Yorta Yorta out at Echuca somehow or other they ended up in the same place. They married on Gadigal land back in the 50s. And my antecedents on both sides have a strong Irish background. So we've got some very strong Irish revolutionary stock in our family. But my grandmother's father was

Norwegian. He was the merchant sailor. And so I'd have existing and continuing relatives over in Norway. And we also have strong presence across European nations. So particularly German Austrian, that we had a strain of the family, a lot of the family that came out, which is actually where my name comes from Christina are named after my great grandmother and her family were the strokes and they were Austrian revolutionaries who came out in the 1860s when things got a bit tight in Austria, and apparently my aunt who's a professor of history has traced one of our antecedents from stoke line back to being present at Eureka. So we've got sort of multi generations of activism union labor movement activism, and of course, that segwayed across into women's movement activism for the last three generations and generally speaking, I guess that's the family trade is changing things for the better.

Helga Svendsen 3:15

I love it a family history in being revolutionaries what a great stock and line too

Christina Ryan 3:22

Totally Yes. And across all places that you know, we we do it with through the rinds, but of course, actually it's across multiple bases.

Helga Svendsen 3:29

I think you said in there you were born on Gadigal country. So did you grow up there and tell us about your siblings?

Christina Ryan 3:36

Well, no, I didn't. My father moved around a lot. He did a lot of work running the wharves. And so we moved around a lot. So when I was a baby, we moved up to Brisbane here, my parents had already been in Cairns and Rockhampton, and places like that. And then my oldest sister and I were born in Sydney, Gadigal land and we moved up to Brisbane when I was a baby. And then my two younger sisters were born up there. And so there's four of us. And then we moved down to Canberra, as did many, many people in the early 70s, when there was a massive influx into Canberra when the population of Canberra, literally with trembling each year, and so my family are fundamentally a Canberra family, and lived here ever since. So my parents lived here for pretty much 50 years.

Helga Svendsen 4:25

You've moved around a bit, again, hearing in your history, there's a line of revolutionaries and also quite a bit of moving around of different people as well. So interesting. Final question before we get on to our actual topic, but I'm wondering, Where do you feel your place or your home is?

Christina Ryan 4:41

Oh, I'm a Canberra girl. And I do feel that there's a mountain just over there. Mount Ainsley, and I have always lived in the within view of Mount Ainslie, and I grew up in the suburb of Ainsley in Canberra on Dunwall country, and it has great meaning growing up in Ainsley to those of us who've done it. When you're an agency person, you're in line to the person next eat. So, a little bit like down your way maybe being a Collingwood person or something like that not dissimilar so I'm an Ainsley girl I have always lived within the that sort of circle, even though I don't live in Ainsley now.

Helga Svendsen 5:18

I will thank you, it is always great to hear a bit of people's story. However, it would also be awesome to have a conversation with you about leadership and disability in the same sentence, and even leadership and disability and the boardroom in the same sentence.

Christina Ryan 5:36

All year. So oh, how much time time a week. We could be here till next week, we'll need a couple of bottles of wine here.

Helga Svendsen 5:45

Next time I'm in Canberra that can definitely be organised.

Christina Ryan 5:48

Thank you. Well, where should we begin?

Helga Svendsen 5:51

If we're discussing disability and leadership and the boardroom? If we're popping them all in one sentence? Where should we begin?

Christina Ryan 5:57

Well, we begin by actually saying it. I think that's the big one. And it sounds really weird to say that. But the reality is, people just don't think of disabled people as leaders. And six or so years ago, when I was getting this all going, it just wasn't a thing. People just didn't think about it. And when you were talking about disability, it was always about entry level employment. The assumption being that there are no disabled people doing leadership anywhere, which of course, is rubbish. And so actually putting the two words in the same sentence is quite a radical thing it brings that front of mind is sort of Oh, my goodness, you mean, give me an actual disabled people doing actual leadership insight? Yeah, the truth of the matter is, we're not very present, we've only got four people across the nine Australian Parliament's, for example. We don't have any cabinet ministers are not in any of them in the national boards, if you want to call them that. We're not very present in boardrooms at all, that is probably our biggest presence, our most dense presence. But the real gap is also disability specific organisations. So organisations that actually support or provide services to disabled people are really appalling. And having disabled people on their boards, they just don't have very many of us. And, and so there's a real push on to change that. Increasingly, we've got highly experienced board operatives, you know, we've got people who've been blocked myself, you know, I mean, I've had my company directors for 15 years, there's plenty of us out there who are highly experienced board members, chairs, that sort of thing. But it's not really something where you got a heavy presence. So you might have one person here or there. And there's not an assumption that it's necessary. And I think that's where the big gap is, we need to think more in terms of it being necessary. You know, I come from a background in the women's movement. So I did gender long before I got into into disability. And now I do the intersectional space as well, the disabled women's space. But one of the things that we recognized decades ago in relation to women is that you don't just get one, you get several, you know, you have to make a decision to have a critical mass of women present, whether that's in a boardroom, whether it's in your executive, whether it's in the cabinet, or or in the party room, it doesn't matter. But you need a certain presence of women, you can't just have the one, we haven't got to that point yet with disability, it's not really understood. And the benefits of diversity are just not acknowledged or discussed, it's always talked about in terms of how difficult it might be or the barriers that are faced, you know, what we'd have to do and how much it might cost and some of those things that get up my nose? To be frank, you know, I get a bit annoyed, I think, you know, we don't think in terms of how costly it might be to have two different types of toilets. But apparently, we have to think it's costly to be able to get the Board Papers out on time, so that everyone's got time to read them before the meeting in whatever format, they read them in. Stuff like that, you know, now, a lot of diversity in boardrooms is really just good practice.

Helga Svendsen 9:09

And accessibility for all, which might be prompted by a person with a disability. But he's not just for that person with a disability. It's accessibility all round.

Christina Ryan 9:19

It's exactly that. And, you know, one of the most obvious ones for me apart from things like getting a papers a week in advance, which is simply good practice, and every board should be doing it. I've been a CEO for long term. So I've serviced a lot of boards over the years and you just factored into your timetable to get the papers out, you know, you just do it. Now, occasionally something turns up and it should be a very rare event that you have something a bit last minute. And that would be perhaps a risk you hadn't anticipated or major announcement. It's not like something that you want to have a big discussion about. One of the ones that really shows up for me and I think that more and more people are becoming aware of in this age of zoom In virtual meetings, is the politeness of waiting for someone to finish before you open your mouth. Now, for folks with hearing impairment of all kinds, people who use the captions for folks who have all sorts of hearing impairments where they can't hear multiple things at once, there are people who have focus issues or sensory issues or neuro divergent folk who can only have so much going on at the same time before they get overwhelmed. And everyone of course, is different, speaking one at a time, it's just, it's just polite. And suddenly, everyone can hear each other and you can you can see what's going on. So not interrupting, and waiting for people to finish. I'm often shocked actually, when I find myself in a situation where there's people who do interrupt, and I think, Oh, my goodness, oh, I haven't come across this for a while. It isn't very common at all in the disability community, it's, it's something that just doesn't happen much. It's usually people who haven't had a lot of practice and being around other people who tend to be a bit more self focused. And, you know, that's okay. They learn.

Helga Svendsen 11:09

Eventually, yes. And it's so interesting your reflections about the virtual environment in that way, because it doesn't work to have multiple people talking at one time. I have noticed even in myself that when I'm in person with people, I do much more nonverbal signals as well, which isn't always great. If you're working with somebody who's blind, that's not particularly useful. But even in real life, I will just, you know, I do the thumbs up sometimes, rather than butting in, you don't have to say, Yes, I agree with you, you know, there are other ways of being able to indicate that without having to reframe everything and say it in your own words.

Christina Ryan 11:46

That's right. That's right. That said, I find myself in meetings of blind people realizing that nodding, as I was just doing with you earlier, is useless. So in fact, I might do the sort of thing, which isn't ideal, but it's good for that person, because they then know that you're hearing them. So you just have to operate, you know, everyone's a bit different. It's about recognizing that difference and embracing it, actually using it and thinking about how it helps you to focus better, yes, helps you to stay more present in your communications. But it also has some side benefits, because it it assists you in maintaining an awareness of what you're saying and how you're conveying it. And so, leadership, I mean, I'm a leadership coach these days, this is what I do. But in leadership terms, the more developed a leader is, the more self aware they become. So you can identify some of the really fantastic leaders, the people that we look to and think are usually fairly self aware people. And part of it is that communication, you can almost observe yourself as you're talking, or communicating

however you do your talking guy, because there are people that don't use speech in talking, of course, and so it's important to have that self awareness. Particularly if you're trying to get a point across, you know, it helps you with things like rambling or not coming to the point, it can also assist you in whether you're hitting the mark with your audience. So some of these things are really valuable little tools of the trade.

Helga Svendsen 13:20

So I'm wondering if you've got any stories that you're able to share of maybe of examples where it's working well, or, dare I say it even examples where it's not working so well, so that we can learn from that? Yeah, if you've got any stories you can share?

Christina Ryan 13:35

I'm going to start with a couple of don't do this stories. At the Disability Leadership Institute, we've got a lot of members. And you know, there's a lot of people that talk to me, all the time in all sorts of forums around things that are happening that aren't great in this space. And one of the ones I get is that thing around, preparing for meetings, so not being sent the papers on time or not being sent them in a format that actually is readable by that person. And, you know, we've got people who are highly experienced board operatives who are unable to participate in the board because they haven't been sent the papers or because the interpreter wasn't booked. Someone hasn't turned the captions on on Zoom, you know, they just don't do it automatically. You have to ask every time. The other thing that really comes to the fore in that space, is tokenism. Now, again, we dealt with this in the women's movement, you know, and we still do where you're there because you're the token diversity person and one of my first nations friends was actually talking about this in her experience, and if you days ago, when she was talking about being the token diversity person in the room, you're the diversity. But you know, people who are literally the only disabled person on the board, and it doesn't matter that they're incredibly competent that they've set on a good day. Even boards before they know what they're doing, they are treated like they're just there because they're the disability presence in the room. And so they're not asked to participate in the conversation. They're not given time to participate in the conversation if they communicate differently. And it really does reduce their board membership to tokenism. And, you know, really, when you consider what the benefits of diversity are, we just talked about some of them. You know, it's not just about how the meeting proceeds. But you might make a much better decision. Because everything got slowed down a bit. There's nothing worse than the two people in the room who think they know everything pushed for the decision to be made rapidly, when there's actually still three people sitting there with a very good question, indeed, that they'd like to be asking. So tokenism is not attractive, it's unnecessary, there are plenty of high quality disabled bloke who can sit on boards, you know, you do not need to be appointing someone who doesn't have the experience that you need. You get people who have the governance expertise. So watch for that one watch for that one. I actually had a boss 20 years ago, when I was first moving into management. And I first had some First Nations people on my team. And, you know, that was an exciting thing to do. But she said to me, you don't get mine, Christine, you get to. And she'd have a lot of experience, she was very much welcomed into several

First Nations groups, as family. And so she really did know what she was talking about. I thought, What an incredible thing to say. And it stuck with me clearly. And I think about that in the same context with any minority group. And if you're the only one in the room, it can be really difficult. But if you've got someone else, now, you might not like each other. But you're not the only one. And it changes the dynamic. So you don't get one, you get two. And I think that's really important.

Helga Svendsen 17:01

So can I check on that? Because I sometimes wrestle with this, you don't get one you get two? Or more or more? That's right. Not limited? Do you mean one or more? For example, person with a disability, First Nations person, whatever it may be? Or is it one or more person who's in a minority? So you might have a board that's got one First Nations person, one person with a disability, culturally diverse background, person of color, whatever it may be? Is that because I'm sure you've heard it before? Oh, well, we can have two people with a disability and two people, you know? Where would be the space for the old white men, then Christine.

Christina Ryan 17:40

That could never work? Well, let's have a think about what the percentage of old white men is in the population for start, and I'll guarantee you it's not as large as the percentages of the other two groups that we just talked about. So there's a thought, actually, about half of all First Nations people are disabled. So you might go for some intersectionality, folks, you know, come on down. Interesting, right? Yes, there's a fairly hefty presence of disability amongst culturally diverse communities, particularly refugee populations, because war and conflict is the largest creator of disability on the planet, you don't have to just get the one. And it's the whole thing about if you've got a single woman on your board, but she also has to be first nations and a lesbian, you know, it's like you cover all your bases in one goes, come on, you know, you can get intersectional and you can do this. But really, it's about if you've got one disabled person get to get to, if you've got one First Nations person get to, it's important to have a situation where people don't feel that there's all of those old white blokes plus me, and you become the fall guy for everything. Everything that happens, you know, I'm supposed to know everything there is to know about disability. Now, there's 5 million of us in this country, I just got to stick my head out there and say, I don't actually know the disability experience of absolutely all 5 million, I really can't tell you that. I can give you some broad views about the systemically but actually, yeah, I'm not on to that one. In the same way that, you know, the single women turning up in non traditional workplaces back in the 80s used to be you know, everything about women, they had to answer all the questions. It's like, oh, really, I mean, for heaven's sake, get a grip. So it's about getting to, of whatever the minority group is, even the term minority group is not acceptable in some spaces, but I use it. So I've used it there. It's about making sure that people feel that their diversity is welcome. And that it's actually a part of the conversation, not assimilation. And this is something I talk about a bit when I when I do my talking is if you're trying to get people to assimilate, in other words, to act like you do. So to act as though they're not disabled, or to act as though they're a white person with all the white privileges that some of us have had, you know, the white schooling and the white middle class upbringings and things like that

they And what's the point of diversity, though you actually want people to be different. But to be different people need need to feel safe. They need to feel that they can speak. And actually having someone just say to them, oh, no, well, you just tell us when you think you need something or when something happens? Well, no, that isn't it, that doesn't create safety, that's not inclusion, hot tip that's not inclusion, it is actually about creating a space where people are accepted for who they are and how they operate. And that is going to be different. And between two disabled people, it's going to be different. I am not a person with a sensory impairment, I'm not blind or visually impaired. I'm not deaf or hard of hearing. I don't require communications support. And so I have a very different experience of participating in a meeting to somebody who does.

Helga Svendsen 20:50

As I understand it, it is okay to ask.

Christina Ryan 20:53

Yeah, it is okay to ask, it's how you ask is a thing. So I'm not going to get too technical about this, because it can be off putting for people. It's a bit like, if you're holding an event, you just simply put it on the invitation, please let us know what your accessibility needs are, then you make sure you do them. You don't sort of question them, you don't say, are we doing this? So will that be good enough? It's like, you ask, and then you do whatever the person requires. It's not rocket science. But it really isn't. And you're right, everybody has some form of access needs. We all have different times of the day that I'm going to suit us. You know, that's, that's a big first one. Some people operate at different times better than others. You know, some people are early people, other people are later people. I'm cactus after dinner. So if you don't get me before seven o'clock in the evening, well, you might as well not bother. I don't sign up for things where the meetings are at eight o'clock at night, because that's just not gonna work for me. You know, everybody's got something, you know, for some people actually having to be there physically is a barrier. And I think that's where we, we think diversity is only limited to certain minority groups in the population, when in fact, everybody has something that they need. And what we've learned over the last few years, if we've learned nothing else, is that flexibility helps us all to work better. Ask about what people need, and and then do it.

Helga Svendsen 22:20

It's interesting. For my Take on Board Accelerator program, I think it was two years ago, I introduced a question. I can't remember exactly how I framed it, but it's essentially, what are your accessibility needs? Or what do you need to get the most out of this program or something along those lines, and it is fascinating, some of the responses I get. And they are the responses are not just from people with a disability, although they are sometimes but from all sorts of people saying, Send the documents in this format, or make sure it's sent out here, or I really like to know the detail or whatever it may be, it is absolutely fascinating to me, as the person facilitating that program to know



that prior it is gold, like people just willingly hand over gold, about how they can get the most out of the program, because it's in their best interests. And it's in my best interests, and everybody else involved in the program. So I can't remember who suggested I do that a few years ago, but it is a fabulous question just to have as part of registration.

Christina Ryan 23:19

It's just up front. And I think the classic for me is, you know, the the expectation that we should have meetings at lunchtime, and nobody bothers to provide food. You know, I mean, if we're gonna have meetings at lunchtime when you're gonna have to expect to see people eating and, and now we do that on Zoom particular board I'm on at the moment, we've changed the meeting time. So that doesn't happen anymore. But the last couple of years, we were meeting at 12 to 130. Yes. You know, I'm one of those people. Actually, I haven't, I'm an early status. So by the time I get to midday, I actually need my I need my lunch. And so I just started bringing my food, I thought this is ridiculous. And of course me doing it, even on Zoom, gave it others license. And so increasingly, everybody else is bringing their feet along. And some people feel a bit delicate. So they'll mute their video while they're eating.

Helga Svendsen 24:06

I am fascinated by that practice of people are meeting so I'll turn my camera off. It's like if you and I were out for lunch, you don't put a screen up so that you can't see people eat like I'm okay to see people eat.

Christina Ryan 24:18

That's right. I refuse. I refuse, I leave my video on I think I'm here. It's lunchtime. You're going to watch me eat.

Helga Svendsen 24:28

You warned me of this, Christina that we're in the best possible way that this conversation would flow beautifully, easily and it has. But I'm wondering what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Christina Ryan 24:42

Well, it's a it's a good thing to ask earlier. I've just been putting together my article for the month and because it's the back end of the year, don't wanna jinx the timing of the podcast going out but the back end of the year, I'm looking forward to 2023 and to me, it's actually about what are people

doing about this? What are people doing in their in 2023 to actually make board diversity reality? And the answer is just do it. Just get some diverse people. It's about moving into the networks that are not your regular networks. It's about speaking to people, you know, not just about who, you know, it's not about oh, do we know someone who can take this vacancy, it's actually about going out there to some of those places where you might find people a diversity. But it's also about recognizing that we don't know everything. And we don't have to, and it's okay. Disability Leadership is a thing. And I guess for me, the big message is embrace it. There's absolute wealth of talent out there in disability leadership that isn't being used as well as it could be. And it's going to make a difference to your organisation, it makes a difference to the bottom line. But what we also know, for example, is disabled people are 10% more innovative in the workplace than other people, there is actual research that shows this people. And what that means is that your organisation might just need a disabled person in the room to get you over a hump. But you're also going to have better productivity. And we need more of that in Australia. My goodness, our productivity has sunk very low. So it is about the big picture. It's about looking at how diversity changes things up about problem solving. You talked about better decisions Helga, and that's exactly what we need to keep reminding ourselves of. But I think the biggest thing that listeners could be doing in 2023, is thinking about how am I being an ally? Yeah, great. And the uncomfortable truth is, sometimes that's going to mean getting out of the way, sometimes you'll see an opportunity that you like the look of, but actually, they don't need another regular white person. What they need is a diverse person. So step out of the way, and let that person in. And that can be the change that's necessary. Think about where your allyship is sitting.

Helga Svendsen 27:15

That is a fabulous prompt. And I will prompt two things on that. One is, we've talked about allyship with Tricia Malowney, on the podcast before so I'll pop a link to that in the show notes. But the other thing is that when you're on a board, and you're coming up to the end of your term, use that as an opportunity to prompt this as well. So it might not necessarily be step back. So somebody else can step forward for a new role. It might be when you are stepping back anyway, opening up the conversation around broader diversity in that boardroom, as well.

Christina Ryan 27:47

Absolutely. And I often say that to people, what's your succession planning looking like? And where's the disability presence in that succession planning. And, you know, make sure that the person coming after you is a disability leader, do it, you can be proactive about making that happen. Instead of hoping and expecting because hoping and expecting don't do the job. Someone has to get proactive and make it you make it you.

Helga Svendsen 28:13

If people are advertising board roles. Do you do that as part of the Disability Leadership Institute? Do you share roles like that with your community?

Christina Ryan 28:22

We absolutely do. Thank you for asking, we have something called the National Register of Disability Leaders. It's the only one of its kind on the planet, everybody. And it has hundreds of high quality positions, right across Australia, right across Australia. So people advertise all sorts of positions, they might be board positions, they might be employment positions, they might be opportunities for other things, doesn't matter. If you've got an opportunity, then come on down. There's an entire process available through our website, [disabilityleaders.com.au](http://disabilityleaders.com.au). And you can advertise your opportunity to those hundreds of disability leaders all over Australia. And we have incredibly good results. We get incredible feedback from people saying I expected maybe to find one person and I've ended up with a field of candidates. And I'm going to have to have a selection process thinking. You betcha.

Helga Svendsen 29:21

Excellent. All right, folks. So we'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes. And yeah, if you've got roles, this is the easiest way possible to show your allyship is to share it. It is not the only way I hasten to add, just sharing things with the Disability Leadership Institute is not the be all and end all. As wonderful as your list is there are other things that can be done as well. Absolutely. Yes. So that is one resource. Is there any other resources you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Christina Ryan 29:51

Another thing on our website is the disability business directory, which are businesses that are owned and run by members of the Disability Leadership Institute. I think the third resource that people listening might want to be aware of is disabled people are far less likely to be offered professional development opportunities. And so think about what the professional development opportunities the development of your leaders looks like. And fundamentally, what the institute is, is a professional development hub. So we're there, we have courses, we have a community of practice, we have all manner of things, which support disability leaders to do their thing. You know, we're there, and we're there for a reason. We're there to make sure that disability leaders aren't feeling isolated, and that their careers flourish.

Helga Svendsen 30:42

Fantastic. Well, as I say, we will definitely make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. And, folks, if you're listening while you're out walking, or you're driving, or commuting or whatever, go to my website, if you're not able to do it, whilst you're listening, all of the links will be there. Christina, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom, your insights, your resources, and tips with the Take on Board community today. I'm pretty sure this will help those in the Take on Board community to be active allies in this so thank you for sharing today.

Christina Ryan 31:13

Oh, absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me along.