

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 240

Transcript – Emma Bennison knows how to navigate wins and challenges around the board table



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Emma Bennison about wins and challenges in the boardroom.

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 unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present and any First Nations people who may be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters, skies and culture. I stand in solidarity with First Nations people for reconciliation, and seeking voice treaty and truth. Always was always will be Aboriginal land.

Now, let me tell you about Emma. Emma is on the boards of NV Access Limited, and she's the chair of Attitude Foundation. She has previously been on a whole range of boards including Arts Access Australia, Blind Citizens Australia, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, disability voices Tasmania, and Every Australian Counts and experienced chair, non Executive Director and CEO writer, TEDx speaker, sidenote. That's how Emma came to be here, I saw her speaking at the TEDx Women event in Maldon recently. Anyway, back to her bio TEDx speaker and advocate Emma excels at applying curiosity, creativity and innovation to transforming organisations and to solving the most challenging of strategic problems. Driven by a commitment to develop tomorrow's leaders. She thrives on coaching, mentoring and nurturing people so they can reach their full potential without losing themselves in the process. Just the sort of person we'd love here at Take on Board. So welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Emma,

Emma Bennison 1:37

Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:39

It is such a joy. And as I said just a moment earlier, I saw Emma speak recently at the TEDx Maldon Women event, which was amazing. And then then we made this happen. Emma, before we dig into the wins and the challenges of the boardroom, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me a story about young Emma that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Emma Bennison 2:02

Well, I can tell you that my first real experience of leadership, I suppose you could call it was in the context of the Arts. I'm a singer in another life and a songwriter. And I used to attend a Braille music camp in Mittagong, in southern New South Wales, and one of my first leadership experiences was running choirs and trying to wrangle young people and get them to sing their parts and find their places in Braille music scores. And it was a fantastic, I guess, precursor to joining a board, because you really have to know how to meet people where they're at. And you really have to know how to encourage and get people in who used even if the style of music may be something they absolutely despise, or they're not a very good Braille reader, or whatever it might be. So I think for me, that was a really great training ground for joining a board and ultimately chairing boards, because it really is sometimes a challenge getting lots of different people from lots of different backgrounds and at lots of different musical levels to come together and, and do something that sounds incredible. And thankfully, we did actually achieve that. And it was a wonderful experience for me. And I think it was really character building and formative for.

Helga Svendsen 3:31

How amazing it is. I mean, maybe this is an uncharitable way of saying it. So forgive me if it is but a bit of herding cats in your choir probably doesn't go away for the herding of cats that is required in the boardroom as well.

Emma Bennison 3:45

No, no, no, absolutely. And just kind of getting to know people and trying to suspend any kind of judgment and trying to just enjoy people, which I do, thankfully.

Helga Svendsen 3:56

So I'm going to ask a stupid question I hadn't thought about I've obviously thought about Braille as a language and means of communication. But music is in Braille as well. Yeah, of course, it makes so much sense now that you say it, but there I'd never thought of it before. Tell me more.

Emma Bennison 4:10

Well, basically, what happens in vocal music is that the words are on one line. And then underneath that, you have a linear representation of the musical score. So rather than being like on a five line staff as print music is the top part of the Braille cell designates the pitch of the note and the bottom part of the cell designates the length of the note. And so that's how it's represented on the Braille page.

Helga Svendsen 4:37

Oh my god, that is so fantastic. So is it right hand left hand one is words. One is the score, basically.

Emma Bennison 4:44

Yeah, it's either that or if you've got a good memory, which I used to have, but don't have any more, you can often memorize the lyrics and then read the music or vice versa, whatever you feel big to do.

Helga Svendsen 4:55

Excellent. Thank you. I have learned something and in fact thinking about that bring together the choir and all of those differences. It's also in a way, it's that common language. That is a lovely story. Thank you. Do you still choir?

Emma Bennison 5:07

Not at the moment, but I dip in and out of it when I can, when I have the time. I'm pretty busy with my day job and my board roles at the moment. But I try to when I can, because I love it. Absolutely love it.

Helga Svendsen 5:18

I didn't mention your day job, actually, as part of the intro. So just briefly, tell us about your day job as well. And then I promise we will dig into the boardroom stories. But yeah, just briefly, tell us about your day job.

Emma Bennison 5:28

So I am the Chief Innovation Officer at Life Without Barriers, life without barriers is one of Australia's largest providers of Community Services. And I have this incredibly awesome job, which allows me to

really push the boundaries, and look at how life without barriers sort of transforms as we go forward. And how we make sure that the organisation really is listening to and meeting the needs of the people that we support and embedding people's lived experience, whatever that might be, because we provide everything from disability services to Child Youth and Family Services to migrant services. So it's a really, really broad remit. So it's a very exciting roll, and I'm really enjoying it.

Helga Svendsen 6:15

So we're talking about wins and challenges in the boardroom, you've got a wealth of boardroom experience, maybe in as much detail as you're willing to share, maybe you can share with us a win that you've had in the boardroom what it was and what happened?

Emma Bennison 6:29

Well, I was on the board of Arts Access Australia, and I can name it because this has been quite publicly discussed. And the organisation is very small, very small organisation. And really was going through some struggles in terms of retaining its funding and finding its purpose. It was an organisation that whose members were actually peak bodies. So the state based arts and disability organisations around Australia were its members. And so there was always that tension that you get with organisations that are peaks of peaks, where you have the tension of the organisations bringing board members to the table. And those board members needing to keep the agenda of Arts Access of Australia at the forefront, and putting their own kind of organisational agendas to one side. Now that can be really hard, because I used to be in that position before I joined the board. So I understand that that can be really hard. But we actually managed as a board to rewrite the Constitution so that we could really clarify the role of board members, we've really made that clear, we got clear about what that was. We also had an opportunity to really work through what was the purpose of the organisation redid the business plan, we worked through what we were going to submit to the funding body. And as a result of that, and a lot of other work that went on behind the scenes and a lot of talking and a lot of discussion between myself as chair and the funding body, we actually managed to secure a significant increase in the end to the organisation's funding. And that not only enabled us to secure to access Australia's future for the next three years, but it also enabled us to share some of that funding, which was designated for the whole of the sector, with the state based arts organisations. So it ultimately flowed down to artists and arts workers with disabilities. So I felt like that was just a massive achievement, not just for me, but for that board, because we turned the organisation from, you know, literally almost being defunded to significantly increasing its budget and its footprint. So it was a really, that was a really big win took a lot of work. But it was a big win.

Helga Svendsen 9:06

I'm wondering if we can dig into it took a lot of work both for you as one of the members of the board, but also for the board overall, like what does it take from the board as a whole? What does it take from you to have that sort of win?

Emma Bennison 9:22

It's so interesting that you asked me that question, because I find it so difficult to really pull it apart because it's just, you know, when you're in it, it just seems like such a flurry of intensity that you almost it's almost gets very difficult to pull it apart. But I think if I had to sort of name some key elements, one was that I took the leadership and said, right, there is nothing at the table that's off limits. We're going to have a no holds barred conversation about this organisation, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. We're going to sit down and we're going to work through What's working? What's not working? What do we need to do differently? Who are we here to serve, we really, really drill down. And I think what made it successful was that we were honest with each other, we respected each other, we were honest with each other people were prepared to say the things that nobody wanted to hear, I was prepared to, and I'm not gonna say it was easy. But there were times when I really had to put my own defensiveness to one side to be able to go, Okay, what that person said, I didn't, I didn't find that very nice or helpful, but I'm just, that's okay, we're gonna put that to one side and try and move forward for the good of the people that we are here to serve. And I think, really, that's what did it. And I think the other thing we did was we really had a by the end of those conversations, and some of them we were in a room for a couple of days at a time sometimes. And I think we really came away from it with a very clear purpose, a shared purpose of what we wanted to do, and why the organisation couldn't, it couldn't fold. We just came away with the sense that no, it wasn't going to fold. That actually would have been the easier road. But we just couldn't bear to, for that to happen. And, you know, look, I also think, the fact that we had a chair person who was person with disability, that being me, I do actually think, I'm not gonna say that that made all the difference. But I do think it made a massive difference, when I was the one often going to have really intense conversations with funding bodies. Those people were people who already respected me, because I held a state a role as CEO of a state organisation. So they already respected me for that. But also, it was really hard for them to blow me off. I was a member of the target group for this organisation. So it was very much harder for them to go Oh, Emma I don't think it's that important, you know, do you really think it matters, like they couldn't do that? They couldn't do that. And so I do actually think that that really helped. But also, I was just, and people who know me will not be surprised to hear this. I was like a dog with a bone. I had a lot of people behind me to supporting me to be like a dog with a bone, I had some really experienced people on that board, like I was a lot less experienced than I am now. This is like 2010 or something. But I had some really, really smart, experienced people on that board, who were kind enough to give me the benefit of their wisdom. And to call me up and go me, you need to ring them again, you need to call them again. And I'd go, I don't really want to, I've called them twice this week. No, you need to call them again, go and call them again. So I was so fortunate to have those people who would just keep me going when I was like, Oh, the imposter syndrome was at an all time high. So yeah, it takes kind of humility, I think to

be able to go I don't actually know what I'm doing here. But I'm prepared to listen to the people who do actually get what needs to be done, done.

Helga Svendsen 13:09

So I'm intrigued often chairing a board. I've never been in a board where the chair of the boards has been blind, and the chair of the boards that I've seen, and when I've been sharing, it's a lot of watching the room and seeing what's going on and picking up the visual cues. So I'm fascinated Emma and obviously, you don't have to do that, because you're an awesome chair. So how do you do it? Because you must do other stuff?

Emma Bennison 13:31

It's an interesting question. Well, there's a couple of things that I do. One is that, and I learned this, I've learned this again from some amazing mentors. One is that I am always Ultra prepared. I always have an annotated agenda, so that I can not be thinking about the next thing that I'm going to say, but that I can be listening, because and this is not about blindness, everybody should do this, in my opinion. But if you're not focused solely on what the person is saying, even if they boring you to tears, then you're not doing your job. And I listen a lot to what people are saying I also will often have, if I'm lucky enough to have someone on the board, who is a really good reader of body language, I will ask them sometimes if they can just text me or alert me in some way if there's something that I have missed that I need to be aware of. I gotta say though, that very rarely happens. Because you can tell a lot from people's tone of voice. You can tell a lot from what the other people who are not speaking or doing. You can hear if people are starting to get restless, you can hear if there's a bit of sighing going on. And you can sort of recognize when you kind of need to wind someone up or sometimes you gain a lot by listening to what other people say after someone's spoken to so It's just a matter of really being tuned in. And I know it's gonna sound a bit woowoo. But you do get a lot energetically, if you really tuned in to a room, you can pick up a lot energetic from people.

Helga Svendsen 15:13

Yeah, it's interesting. So you're attuned to those things even more?

Emma Bennison 15:17

Yeah, I think so. And I actually do think sometimes body language and visuals can be a distraction? Absolutely. Because people don't always they don't always behave in the way that they are speaking. So sometimes you can actually hear more from people's tone of voice than you can get from body language.

Helga Svendsen 15:35

So yeah, absolutely. That's absolutely right. Oh, thank you. Thanks for letting me go down that garden path. We've heard your reflections about this when at Arts Access and the team that was around that your role as chair, the role of the board around you some of the reflections there that I'm sure people from the Take on Board community that are listening and go, Yeah, that's useful. Likewise, sometimes the challenges, we learn a lot from them as well. And often they're the same right? Wins often come out of challenges...

Emma Bennison 16:03

Just thinking that win sounded a lot like a challenge.

Helga Svendsen 16:07

You know, they are just opposite sides of the same coin, aren't they? So maybe, I don't know, that could have been the challenge as well. But I'm wondering if there's any challenges that stand out for you, again, that in as much detail as you can share, you might be able to talk us through?

Emma Bennison 16:23

Yeah, I can think of, of a couple. I mean, I think one of the biggest challenges of being on a board can be when you're on the board, you're not actually an office bearer. But somebody comes to you, for example, with some issue. And you are deeply concerned by it. And you've done your due diligence, and you know that it's a genuine issue. But you don't feel empowered to actually do anything about it. I've had a number of these sorts of issues over the years where I felt like I really needed to do something. But I didn't know how. And I've had a number of them where I have had to actually go to the chair and say, Look, this is happening. We need to do something about this. And sometimes, and I think this is probably about having a bit of experience over time. But sometimes I've had to be quite Doggett about it. Sometimes I've initially gotten that, oh, look, it's not a really big deal, or yeah, we'll get to that next year. And I've had to keep going back and going no, no, no, this is actually a really serious issue that we need to deal with. Now, it's a massive risk, we need to deal with it now. Now, that's really, really hard. It's really, really hard. And in some instances, what that's actually led to for me is that I've been kind of embroiled in scenarios where, again, I still don't have any particular position. But I'm in embroiled in resolving an issue. And I'm having to sort of try to guide provide guidance without coming across as trying to take over. And it is monumentally difficult sometimes. But what I think for me has always been my guiding kind of light as a director is that it doesn't matter what position you hold, you are ultimately responsible for the health of an organisation. And if you know that there are issues that need to be resolved, that are extremely high risk, such as an issue with staff health and safety, for example, you can't just sit there and go, Well, I can't do anything about it. It's not something I can do anything about. And I don't know how to deal

with it. So I'll just sit back and wait for the chair to decide that it might be time to do something about it. That's not okay. So I think this is not that I would ever want to put anyone off joining a board because there is so much to be said for it. But you do have to be aware that no matter what position you hold on that board, you can't unsee something. So if you say something, you have to act on it, that is your responsibility. And it's not a defence to when the shit hits the fan. It's not a defence to go all I knew about it, but I just didn't know what to do. That is not a defence.

Helga Svendsen 19:26

Or, even I tried and nobody would listen.

Emma Bennison 19:27

Nobody listened to me. That's right. I have had experiences where I've tried, and nobody has listened to me. And so my only option has been to step away. And sometimes that is the only option. And that probably relates to the second one I was gonna raise which was one that was quite public. I had an incident when I was chairing I only chaired Every Australian Counts for a relatively brief period but during that period, I did have some challenges getting the financial reports in an accessible format. Now, I had tried everything I could think of to resolve those challenges. And I think you can tell from our conversation that I'm a reasonable person. So I had really tried to be reasonable. In the end, I decided that the only option I had was to publicly resign. And that's not something I would normally recommend. By the way, I think that's a terrible thing to do to an organisation. But I just didn't, I didn't have a choice. And as a result, I was able to resolve the issue, and I, and I ended up on resigning. But sometimes you do have to make a decision to take a stand when an organisation is doing the wrong thing. And it's not that anyone was doing the wrong thing to be harmful. It was just they hadn't understood the impact of what they were doing.

Helga Svendsen 20:50

And particularly for an organisation it's about advancing the needs and visibility. The Rights of People with Disabilities. Yeah, yeah, exactly. So you were chair, you couldn't get the financial reports in a way that was accessible for you. tried, tried, tried, got a sore head from hitting it against a brick wall. So I said, That's it. I'm out of here. And then they went, Oh, okay, now we can fix it. So your remained as chair, in the end, even though it was a bit of a blow up. And look,

Emma Bennison 21:17

in all fairness, I need to be very clear about this, that Every Australian Counts is, is an excellent organisation. But it was actually it was actually the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations that was responsible for forcing the organisation. So just to be fair to Every Australian Counts.

Helga Svendsen 21:34

Yes, yes, go? Well, I was. I was just thinking in amongst that, because once you've had that, it's like, well, because as the chair as well, you're, you're working closely with the CEO. So although it sounds like maybe it wasn't that direct thing, but I was like, oh, gosh, it was a slightly different. Yes. How do you get that back on track, but you didn't need to.

Emma Bennison 21:52

We did have some really excellent conversations. And you know, the CEO was very good about accepting responsibility and apologizing and all those things. But it's a shame when it gets to that point that you have no choice.

Helga Svendsen 22:05

Yeah, absolutely. Emma, I knew this conversation would go way too quickly. I always do. There's always so much, what are the key things you want people to take from the conversation that we've had today,

Emma Bennison 22:17

Being on a board an absolute privilege and it's also a huge responsibility. I think it's really important to be doing it for the right reasons, I think it's important to do it for the people that you're there to serve. Anyone who thinks there's power involved in being on a board really needs to think again, it's not a powerful role, really, it's a role that's filled with privilege and responsibility. And it's really important to take that seriously, but also not to let it put you off. And I think there are so many times in my career where impostor syndrome could have derailed me. And so like I said, before, connecting with mentors and connecting with people who can help you, it's not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength. So that's really important. And I think the only other thing that we didn't really touch on, but I think it's really important is that sometimes it can actually be harder to chair a board. During the times when things are going well. Sometimes, it's actually easier during a crisis, because you've got something to kind of latch on to. It can be really hard to engage people when things are going well. So having that ability to get to know people and really encourage them to do the things that float their boat is a really important skill. As a chair, I think.

Helga Svendsen 23:31

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

Emma Bennison 23:34

Yeah, well, my favourite book on leadership for many, many years now has been a book called *Through the Wall* by Anna Bligh, the former Queensland Premier. And look, the reason I think it's my favourite book is well, I'm a Queensland so maybe, maybe I'm a bit biased, but she does reflect really, honestly about her leadership during the Queensland floods. And she really reflects on how she navigated the vulnerability that came with that for her personally. And I think with all the talk that goes on these days around vulnerability, I think her reflections on it are really important and on using it, and being very careful and very wise about how and when you are vulnerable. I think it's really good. But beyond that, it's just a really fascinating story, as well.

Helga Svendsen 24:28

Thank you, Emma, thank you so much for Well, first up for going to the Malden TEDx women's session because if it hadn't been for that this may not have occurred. I will put a link to Emma's talk at the Maldon TEDx as well in the show notes as well as a link to *Through the Wall* by Anna Bligh so that you can get a bit more of Emma's awesomeness. So thank you so much for taking literally taking the call and for taking the time to share your wisdom with the take onboard community. I really appreciate it and I'm sure others do too. So thank you for being here.

Emma Bennison 24:59

No problem. Thanks for having me

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