Take on Board Podcast – Episode 278

Transcript – Erin Turner wants boards to expand what diversity means to those at the table

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Erin Turner about building a diverse team in the boardroom.

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, and 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 on Board community to do the same.

Helga Svendsen 0:36

Now, let me introduce Erin. Erin is on the boards of the Australian Financial Complaints Authority, AFCA and arc justice. She's previously been on the board and chair of the Financial Rights Legal Centre. Erin is a consumer advocate that works with governments and regulators to make markets fairer for Australians. She is the CEO of the Consumer Policy Research Centre, a think tank that looks at emerging issues and how markets impact on people. Erin has a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Politics and Public Policy, and she is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Erin.

Erin Turner 1:14

Thank you for having me.

Helga Svendsen 1:15

It is so awesome to have you here. And hot on the heels of interviewing Yien Hong just this morning, who's also on the board of AFCA. So I don't know. You might need to round up some of the other AFCA board members, and we'll have to do a mini series on AFCA.

Erin Turner 1:31

We're a good group, fantastic. The AFCA special.

Helga Svendsen 1:34

Exactly. Why not? Actually, maybe I could. Maybe I could do an alternative dispute resolution mini series. Anyway, that's not for today. That might be for some time in the future. So Erin, everyone here at Take on Board knows that I love talking about building a diverse team. But before we dive into that conversation, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me what was your earliest experience of governance.

Erin Turner 1:59

So I wouldn't have said it was a governance role. But looking back, it very clearly was. And it's from my university days. I was a theatre kid, which anyone who knows me is not at all surprised by. And when I was at university, got really involved in the drama society, and got involved then in the governance of that student-run governance. And when I think about it, I'm like, oh gosh, we were managing an asset. We had a theatre. We were making really complex decisions about budgeting and all of it, lots of feelings because it's a theatre society. There's so many feelings. There's so many big personalities managing that, giving everyone a voice, making people feel like they're coming together rather than breaking apart. It was all really feels that I now look back on and go, oh, I didn't realize what I was learning. It was a really important role for me, and what I've gone on to do in time, and also just lots of fun, because theatre is always fun.

Helga Svendsen 2:51

Absolutely, oh, that is so interesting. I think it is often. Likewise, if I think of my earliest experience of governance, it's probably at school, on school council, which, again, I didn't think of as a kid, going, oh, I'll just get involved in the governance of our school. It's just like, oh, well, let's just get involved, because it's interesting, probably not quite as interesting as the drama society, but still. Well,...

Erin Turner 3:15

It's funny, because the drama society, the governance function, it's not always the thing people want to do, people want to be on stage, they want to write, they want to direct. And until I got involved in the governance piece, I didn't realize what it did. First of all, I had no idea, you know, I was 19-20 and still figuring my whole life out. But also just how important it is to have that group working together to create the preconditions of success for others. You're not on stage, you're not leading the way, but you are setting everything up so others can succeed, which is, again, one of those lessons I'm like, oh, in hindsight, that was a really important thing to learn.

Helga Svendsen 3:50

So interesting. And I think I'm often interested in arts organisations, how they often have, like, an artistic director and a CEO or managing director, which is exactly about combining. They're both equally important. And again, many moons ago, probably at school, maybe at university. I'm not one for getting on stage, but I love the atmosphere of the theatre, so I think back then, I thought, Oh, maybe I could be a theatre producer. Never did. Went on to other things, but it's interesting having, again, it's those different ways of accessing organisations in a way like either the governance of it, or a producer or the artistic director, whatever it may be.

Erin Turner 4:27

Yeah, you don't realize what those roles do until you first take them on in those kind of learning roles. I had no idea I made so many mistakes everyone did. That's the point of student governance and student work. But yeah, also a very fun time.

Helga Svendsen 4:42

So for today, rather than the alternative dispute resolution series or the showcasing of the AFCA board directors or arts boards, any number of topics, we could already delve into, our topic for today is about building a diverse board, or building a team that has diversity in the board room. There's so many ways we could tackle this. Where should we start this conversation?

Erin Turner 5:06

I mean, yeah, this is it. Where do you start a diverse conversation about diversity? Look, for me, it should. Diversity comes in all different shapes and sizes, but the piece that's been really important in my board career has been diversity of perspective and different backgrounds.

Erin Turner 5:20

My first board that I joined, and I was so lucky to do so was Financial Rights Legal Centre I joined relatively early career. I was brought in as someone who was connected to the organisation, and they were doing something that I think a lot of not for profit organisations do, which is recruit through their networks, people who understand the organisation and have that context, and it's a true volunteer role. You're giving back to the sector by serving on a board.

Erin Turner 5:46

But in my time on that board, we work together as a board to evolve that practice and bring in people, some of whom knew the sector really well, some of whom had different backgrounds and experiences, and it made it so much stronger. And I think that that's really stayed with me about that importance of having people who aren't always domain or subject matter experts on your board that can go hang on. They do it like this over in these organisations. How important is that? Or come at a problem with a very different set of tools than you do, and just how much you're missing out on it, if you're not thinking about that in your board recruitment process.

Helga Svendsen 6:22

Picking up on the board recruitment process, although there's probably other parts as well. I mean, I think there's bringing people into the boardroom, looking after the ones that are in the boardroom, and then taking care on the way out as well. But you've asked about the recruitment process, so maybe let's start on the coming in. What's your advice to boards, or what's worked well in your experience in the boards that you've been involved in. What have they done during the recruitment process that has really meant that they value this diversity?

Erin Turner 6:47

So I think for me, having gone through the recruitment process a few times in some different forums, public advertising, I know not every organisation does it. It's not always the right thing at the right time, depending on that skill gap you're trying to fill, but you just don't know who is out there. So if you're only recruiting through people who you know are available, you are missing this opportunity you don't even realize is there. And yes, you still probably will get those board members who are on the board with another one of your board members or through a various network. But if you don't put something out into the world and say, hey, we're looking for help. You are missing people. And then I think in that recruitment process, again, the thing of having an eye to, not just the skills matrix everyone should have that, that's an excellent basic precondition for recruitment, but a diversity matrix is something we started to talk about and use within financial rights, and it was introduced by one of the amazing board members who joined us with a different background.

Erin Turner 7:46

So it's just that awareness of being aware of who's on your board, and the background that they bring is everyone from board? Did they all go to a certain kind of school in a certain city, or did they all come from a certain city, as opposed to a mix of regional and country, do any of your board members look like? I've worked with a lot of legal service provider organisations, community organisations. Does anyone on your board look like the people you help? Is a really important question to start to ask, and when you start to go into that, it's not like you're looking to tick a box, but I think it's that broad awareness of trying not to replicate the backgrounds of the people who might already be on there, and looking for that different view.

Helga Svendsen 8:27

So in that, I'm wondering again, as you were talking through that, I've spoken to a number of chairs recently about diversity in the boardroom, and one of the things I hear a lot is we don't always know, right? We can see some diversity, or know of some diversity, but there's a whole bunch of diversity that is hidden. And I also hear chairs are a little reticent to ask sometimes about what diversity, and I'm thinking LGBTQIA+ for example, even some of the cultural diversity that you can't see, people with a disability that you can't see. Have you come across that in your board experience? And have you got any advice about how to handle that?

Erin Turner 9:06

Well, oh, I mean, I get the reticence. There's some things you shouldn't ask in an interview process, and you don't want it to be it has historically been seen as something that would stop people from seeking opportunities rather than taking them up. I think part of it is thinking about what signals you set out in the advertising process and where you advertise. Let people know about adjustments you make, let people know about how you work, that you use an accessible platform for board papers.

Erin Turner 9:33

Those kind of signals, again, they're going to bring different kinds of people to you. And where you advertise makes a big difference. I think it's also just being really open and asking people what they need as part of that recruitment process. Again, it can send those signals that you are willing to work with someone who might bring a different background and a different perspective. I think it's hard, because you're kind of balancing this thing. You don't want to tick a box, you don't want to be like, yes, we've got someone with a disability, and we've got someone from this background and someone from that background on the board, I think it's about being really deliberate and going, what's our organisation here set up to do? Who are the people we serve? Do we look like them? Are we bringing that perspective and then thinking about working those gaps?

Erin Turner 10:12

For me, I think that's the better way into the conversation and thinking about where you can find those great people.

Helga Svendsen 10:18

Well, what's your advice there? Where can we find those great people?

Erin Turner 10:23

Look I think partly in a way, I'm a bit lucky, because there's some pre made networks in the not for profit sector, Ethical Jobs. Everyone looks at it. It's fantastic. Pro bono, Women on Boards, etc, sending the right signals on LinkedIn, working with a recruiter who can help tap into those networks, and letting them know that you want candidates that bring certain kinds of experience and backgrounds, I'll help you go hunting. It's great.

Helga Svendsen 10:46

Yeah, absolutely. It is amazing. Just side note about advertising. Many moons ago when I was on the board of the YWCA and we advertised for a board chair. So it was a massive role, like we basically said to the market. I guess this will be a day a week. It's unpaid, working with an awesome board, but we had, I don't know, 50 applications, I think, from the most incredible people. It was really hard to shortlist. It was really hard to a point it was great. And a whole bunch of those we would never have known about had we not advertised. So, yeah, I wholeheartedly endorse your comments there about just put it out there. You never know.

Erin Turner 11:23

Yeah, send out a signal. I think there's sometimes a reluctance to do it. You're worried you might not get anything, or you'll get too much, both of which are manageable problems.

Helga Svendsen 11:31

So what about then moving from the kind of intake, the recruitment phase? Because I said before, there's almost working, yes, working with how do we really embrace diversity and inclusion in the boardroom. What's your advice, or what's been your experience there?

Erin Turner 11:46

So I think part of it is about knowing who you're working with and creating those preconditions to have a trusted conversation. Because you're right. You can't just bring a bunch of people with diverse backgrounds into a room and just lock them in there and hope that they're going to work together. That's that's, maybe it'll work, but I think it's really that's the preconditions for chaos for me when I take on a chair role.

Erin Turner 12:08

So much of the work is it's before you get in the room. It's spending time with each of the board members and understanding their perspective, understanding what they're bringing you know, the first introductory coffee, I think is one of the most important things for a chair of a board. It's getting to know someone and kind of all of their different angles, getting their thoughts on what's worked in the past on boards for them, what hasn't, what they're going to bring. And then, pre meeting, I try to create channels for board members to have discussions. So you know, saying, hey, these papers are coming up. If you have views on this that you want to talk with me about, before we get in, let's have that conversation. And then in the facilitation, knowing to throw to certain people, recognizing their expertise, I think, is actually another really important tool in the chairs toolkit. You got to use the diversity you have.

Erin Turner 12:57

You've got to ask that person who will bring in maybe a challenging view or a different angle on something, ask them to open the conversation and treat it as a gift rather than as something that they have to raise in opposition. Because that, I think, is how you start to get diversity working well.

Helga Svendsen 13:13

So when you've done some of these things, I'm wondering if, on the other side, you've had pushback.

Erin Turner 13:17

I wouldn't say pushback. One of the challenges is always time everyone who's doing these kind of roles usually is wearing a couple of hats. The question is, have they had time to engage in the papers, early enough to have a conversation with the chair about some big ideas they want to bring into the room? Have they had the time to do that prep? And sometimes it isn't always there, and you can see them performing it in their mind, in the discussion instead, which is great. I think in time ii's good to learn the styles of your board members, who thinks on the fly, who develops and thinks in time, so you can kind of know how to work with them best.

Erin Turner 13:50

I think if the prep is right, I haven't had too many challenges. The challenges have come when I haven't done the prep for being honest.

Helga Svendsen 13:57

Yeah, which the realities of life do sometimes get in the way, and it is the hidden work. Often of being a chair, people see the chair chairing a meeting, or whatever it may be, but that's the least of the work. It's all the in between conversations.

Erin Turner 14:11

Yeah, it's a skill you don't realize the act of chairing is is even happening at times, until it goes off the rails. Then you finish that meeting, you're like, oh, gosh, I could have done all of these things better. Could have done this prep differently. Could have had this conversation with that person a week ago. That important stuff.

Helga Svendsen 14:30

I mean, which is all about the art, really, isn't it? There's the art and science of being a board director, the art and science of being a board chair. What's helped you? I know this is not quite so much about diversity, but it's probably connected. What's helped you build the art.

Erin Turner 14:45

Learning from other people has been really important. Because I've yet to find the instructional man book for this thing, or at least the single it's not like there's one way of doing this. Part of it is being comfortable enough in your own style and learning from others trying new things, but knowing what works for you. I.

Erin Turner 15:00

I was so lucky. I had this wonderful person in my life, because I took on my first chair role quite quickly. Unfortunately, the chair prior to me got quite ill, quite quickly, stepped down quite suddenly, and I was appointed very quickly. And I was like, I don't know what I'm doing, which happens to a lot of us.

Erin Turner 15:17

The person who was the chair of the organisation I was working at the time, she emailed me as soon as she heard she's like, I'm going to be your mentor. It was not even really a request. It was just, hey, this is happening. I'm here to help you. And I was so grateful for it. We worked together to talk about different ways of working and exploring that setting goals I have as a chair.

Erin Turner 15:38

My mentor is a really she's a very creative thinker. She uses a lot of mirror boards. We had a mirror board. We talked about goals. We prioritized goals. We put them in year by year. Like, if this is a three year gig, what does year one look like? What does year three look like? What might be a bit too ambitious. That just gave me the structure I needed mentally to take on something quite new for me, I'm so grateful for it. And also having someone independent that I could bounce things out off, or just go, oh, gosh, I have no idea about this particular aspect of chairing, or I had never thought about X or Y, or this challenging conversation, or this process for an AGM, just having someone I could call and ask sometimes really stupid questions too was so, I was so grateful for that. It's something I feel like there's a pass it on component that has to come with mentoring. It is such a gift to have someone give that kind of time to you. So being able to do that for others, it's in the back of my mind as well.

Helga Svendsen 16:35

Was I right in hearing she was the chair of the organisation that you worked at, is that right?

Erin Turner 16:41

That's correct, yes. And we knew each other from various... we worked on similar policy issues. She's a really smart human and presented events. We knew each other from a range of things, but I think she also knew this was my first chair role, and just she has some really great depth of governance experience, but knew, I think she says she remembered her first step up, and that the nerves that come with that I was so appreciative that she knew what I needed, even though I couldn't articulate it.

Helga Svendsen 17:11

All right, folks, so there's a there's a tip for you find your mentor as well as you're doing this, and somebody who works in a similar way to use so that you've got that values alignment and practice alignment as well in the way you work together.

Erin Turner 17:24

Yeah or even being an offer to be a mentor. Tell someone you'll be their mentor.

Helga Svendsen 17:34

Oh, I love it. That helps us a bit in terms of in the boardroom stuff. I'm wondering at the other end. So there's people coming onto the board, there's people being in the boardroom. How do we honor that diversity and maximize that diversity on the way out the other side?

Erin Turner 17:50

That's so good. I think part of it is having really clear conversations about terms and term limits. That's part of it, knowing how long you're going to be serving, and having regular conversations with your chair about it, and making it normal to have those conversations.

Erin Turner 18:04

Sometimes I in saying this, I know this is common practice for many boards, but for some smaller not for profits, there can be this assumption that you serve until you're done. Not all organisations have turmoil that's baked into a constitution. That was a change we brought in at financial rights, and it was really it's such a healthy one, it just means that you can think about, what do I want to achieve within this time period, rather than let things run on for a bit.

Erin Turner 18:30

I think it's so important to be able to have a conversation at the end. Again, I probably have come at this mostly as a chair, which is I found it really important to signal when my end was coming. I'm not seeking another term people know 18 months out, give that timing sense for everyone else in a really important way. But also have conversations with people who were stepping off or thinking of stepping off, so to understand what they've learned or what we've done well, what's evolved in a positive way in the time what? What do we stop doing that we might want to re pick up? Or what did we not get to that's on their wish list? What do you want to give to the next board member?

Helga Svendsen 19:08

Yeah, I think it's so important to have those conversations as people are leaving. And I think one thing that I would prompt as well is as part of those, whether they're formally called exit interviews or not, but as people are leaving also some of those conversations about inclusivity and psychological safety in the boardroom. I have spoken to some board members, shall we say, who

may have had diverse views in the boardroom and haven't continued on that board, and no one ever said to them, hey, what's going on here? What worked, what didn't work? So I think it's important to have those conversations with a really non judgment. It's hard to do, right? If you're chairing the board and somebody's saying, actually, this hasn't been a great experience, absolutely not saying this would be the case in your in your case, they're doing exit interviews, sometimes you hear things that are hard to hear, and we need to just suspend our own judgment a little bit and listen. And listen deeply and see what we can learn from that as well.

Erin Turner 20:02

Yeah, I completely agree. Making space for people to say this didn't work for me, or I found something challenging or really hard, really important.

Helga Svendsen 20:13

So thinking about again, building the team with diverse expertise. What should I have asked you that I haven't?

Erin Turner 20:21

Well, one of the things we haven't touched on that I think can get a little lost in the diversity conversation with boards is age and kind of career moments, because quite often in recruitment points, we can prioritise experience. We sometimes really need that experience in depth, but we can lose sight of the value of really fresh eyes or someone from an earlier point in their career, who understands what it's like to have a board maybe get into operations a little bit, I think is actually much less likely to as a result. That's the other kind of angle that I think can be important to consider. Do you have a good mix of people who've never been board members before on your board?

Helga Svendsen 20:57

Yeah, I think it's such an important thing, because often then the heavy inverted commas, stupid questions get asked, but are not stupid at all.

Erin Turner 21:05

No, they're fabulous.

Helga Svendsen 21:07

Yeah, they're awesome questions. So yeah, I both people that haven't been board members before and people that haven't been involved in the sector of whatever the organisation is, so they can bring outside views as well. I think it's all really important to put that in the mix for a rich conversation.

Erin Turner 21:21

And I think being able to have someone who has that confidence to ask the question or the the dumb, the obvious, the question that no one's asking, if you can find that it actually makes things so much safer for everyone else to then start coming out of the woodwork with, oh, initially, yeah, it brings in all those beautiful, different perspectives, totally.

Helga Svendsen 21:41

Oh. Erin, speaking of rich conversations, this has been exactly that from the conversation that we've had about diverse expertise in the boardroom. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Erin Turner 21:56

Oh, I think for me, I think it is about send out wide signals when you're looking for board members. Don't just use your existing networks, go broad, go public, and send the signals that you're looking for people that bring those different expertise. You can name them. You can say, we want people that look like our clients. We want people with this kind of background and expertise send out those positive signals that bring them forward. And I think it's about also the work between meetings. I know that that's a theme that comes up a lot, but that work between the meetings creates that safety for people with different perspectives and different views to air it in the meeting. That's where the good stuff comes.

Helga Svendsen 22:35

Yeah, great tips. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Erin Turner 22:40

Actually, I've got my favourite book here. It's this book that's really it's given me just a whole bunch of really practical tools about how to have conversations with people, to create, like the pre conditions of a safe team, or working together in a hybrid way. I've mostly used it as a manager, but

it's something that boards need to use this too. We're basically hybrid workers. We're not face to face all the time. We need to talk and think about how we communicate with each other. So it's called 'Remote, Not Different', by Gustavo Rossetti. It's a really good book to think about how you deliberately create culture. What are the conversations you need to have about this is how I work. This is how you work. This is what I need to feel safe, or this is how I like to receive information or feedback. It's really good.

Helga Svendsen 23:25

Oh, that sounds fantastic. Is it based on the world of remote work? Essentially?

Erin Turner 23:29

Yeah, it is what I like about it. It doesn't say that remote is the way to go, or in person or hybrid. It says that whatever you're doing, you need to be deliberate about culture, which is just having those conversations, like, how do we share information between board meetings? How do we share resources between board meetings? What tools do we use? How do we review our meetings, for example, and feedback mechanism. It doesn't even matter what the answer to that is, but the fact that you have that conversation that helps you.

Helga Svendsen 24:00

Oh, I love it. Oh, okay, I'm going to be looking up that book as well. That sounds fantastic. Thank you so much. Oh, thank you so much for answering the call from a random LinkedIn post I think it was. You should get Erin on the podcast. Okay, Erin, will you come on the podcast? Yes, you will. And as I say, it just so happens that it's on the same day as I've interviewed one of your board colleagues from AFCA. So thank you so much for answering the call. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your wisdom with the Take on Board community today. I certainly appreciate it, and I'm sure they will as well. So thank you for being here and sharing.

Erin Turner 24:33

Oh, thank you so much for having me. It's real pleasure to be part of Take on Board.

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