



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 364

# Transcript – Fiona Bennett wants you to plan your board chair communications

Hello, and welcome to the Take on Board podcast. I'm your host, Helga Svendsen. I know that being on a board can be an incredibly valuable, interesting, and exciting experience. Yet, it can also be lonely, challenging, and let's face it, pretty hard. So here at Take on Board, I'll bring you weekly tips, tricks, and advice to help navigate your way onto your first board, your next board, or to build your governance wisdom.

Now, on with the show.

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Fiona Bennett about clear and planned communication for board chairs. 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 acknowledge their continuing connections to land, waters, skies, culture, and country. I support Voice, Treaty, and Truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. Now, let me tell you about Fiona. Fiona is the chair of Australian Mutual Bank, and she's also on the board of Neami.

She's a certified practicing accountant with extensive experience in financial management, governance, audit, and risk management across listed companies, New South Wales government, and banking. Fiona lives in Central West New South Wales and is passionate about equity of access to healthcare. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Fiona.

Thanks, Helga. Nice to be here.

It is so-- Oh, it's so good to have you. I-- Many in the Take on Board community will know that I put a call out to interview chairs of boards, and you were nominated, oh, I can't recall who by, but somebody nominated you, so I'm sure we're going to have an awesome conversation.

Thank you.

So before we dive into the importance of communication for board chairs, as always, I just want to dig a little bit deeper about you. So Fiona, I'm wondering if you can tell me something that you're proud of from the last month or so.

Okay. Thanks, Helia. Well, um, as you said, I'm the chair of Australian Mutual Bank, and I recently had to chair a special general meeting of members, which was done as a hybrid meeting at the Park Royal Hotel in Sydney.

So I had people in the room and people online and, as you would know, sometimes technology doesn't work so well. I was going super well. I had done my, um, presentation to members, and we'd gotten to the point of voting on a proposed merger, and during that time, the internet dropped out, so we lost everybody online.

And-

Oh no ...

I'm proud of myself because I stayed calm, which in my innas- inside I was panicking, um, and thinking of all the problems that we'd have if we had to reschedule the meeting. But the internet dropped out for six minutes. Um, I didn't need to do any, uh, interpretive dance on the stage to keep people interested.

I was able to communicate with people in the room until we got everyone back online. So the meeting went well from my perspective, and I think it helped that I was, I had trust in, in confidence in the people around me. That was so important that you work in as part of a team.

Absolutely. Oh my goodness.

And it's actually, like in that moment, your role is actually to hold, well, your role as chair is to hold the room together all the time. But in that instance, because everybody else is also thinking, "Oh my God, do we go home? Are we going to get this through?" So your role is to hold it together while the tech crew, wherever and however they are, are sorting out what they need to do.

Yes. Oh my goodness. Well, well done you.

So it went well, yeah. I, look, I stayed calm. That was the main thing I'm proud of myself for, being calm- Absolutely ... and keeping things rolling.

Did the merger go through? Can you say?

The mer-- Yes, the merger was approved by the members on that day, and the mer- uh, the merger was approved by Teachers Mutual Bank members the next day.

So the merger will happen on the 1st of May.

Excellent. Oh, good. I'm, I'm relieved to hear it's the 1st of May as well. I'm always fascinated when mergers, uh, there's another one I'm thinking of, which is starting on the 1st of April, and I'm like: Oh, really? Yes. Don't start on the 1st of April. How will people know it's for real?

Anyway, leaving that aside. And I'm, I'm just interested in that meeting. It was a hybrid meeting. What proportion of people were in the room versus online?

Actually, were, were more people online than in the room. Um, we had done fully online meetings, uh, annual general meetings in years prior and, and for 2025, we did a, a hybrid meeting for the first time thinking that people would be keen to come back.

But it's nice that people choose what suits them in order to, you know, still be engaged.

Yes. It's, it's fascinating, I think, how quickly the world has changed, and it really opens up participation and accessibility for so many people, being able to participate online, so it's great. Oh, excellent. All right.

Well, look, Fiona, that is a beautiful segue, isn't it, to thinking about clear communication, possibly about calm communication, and just how important it is for the chair of a board. You've done a beautiful example of that at that AGM. So I, I'm wondering, in your experience as a chair, what are some of the things that you do to plan your communication?

Well, um, the way I plan is I think about all the parties involved. Now, the communication as chair is not just about planning the board meeting, but of course do plan the board meeting. Know exactly what I want, want to say, what the main conversations are that need to be had. I plan where I think there'll be more interest from directors in delving deeper and have a think about framing those c-conversations.

So as well as planning your meetings, um, you need to pre-plan what, with the company secretary, what the agenda's going to cover. Um, I talk regularly to the CEO. In fact, I have an unscheduled meeting probably every week. Um, other-- It might suit other people to schedule your meetings with the CEO, and that communication is really important.

So leading up to speaking to the CEO, I'll have a think about what's on my mind and what things I see is coming up for the, for the board. Um, and give him the opportunity to tell me what's, you know, what's happening in the organisation that I need to make sure gets communicated in some way to the, to directors, and whether that's urgent, it might be an email prior or, uh, if it can wait till a board meeting, it'll be part of the, um, the board planning.

Other commun-- planning communication, you need to talk to other committee chairs. And another-- an example of a board I'm-- another board I'm on is that the board chair now holds board and committee chair meetings every quarter. This is not a decision-making forum, but it's a really good initiative to make sure everyone's on the same page about the key topics that are coming through the committees to the board in the next three to six months.

Um, I hadn't come across this before in other boards, but I find it helpful because there's various subcommittees or several subcommittees, and it helps with the board planning and prioritizing the discussions. Also as chair, you need to plan your communications with other directors. Um, I hold one-on-ones with, um, the other directors of the board that I'm chair of annually.

That helps for succession planning, director development, um, receiving and giving feedback. Um, and also during the year, you may need to reach out in a planned way to directors if you want to tap their thinking on a particular topic, particularly if they're the, um, subject matter expert on something.

I'm fascinated.

So the board, I think you said the board that you're on, there's a quarterly meeting of committee chairs and the board chair. Is that- Because- ...

is that what I heard you say? Yes. Because that board has several sub-committees, it's a way of making sure the key topics are understood by all the committee chairs.

There is absolutely no decisions to be made in those meetings, but it's talking about what your sub-committee is going to be looking at and how that might escalate to the board or even through other sub-committees and how it might impact conversations. So it's a good initiative that I hadn't come across before.

Yeah.

This, the whole communication is, it affects culture, and that's an example of a positive, um, step that that board chair took to impact the way we work together. But it does have an impact on culture, and I think your listeners and your, you, you think about the successful organisations you know, I suspect you'll find that the culture of that organisation includes clear communication between the staff, between levels of staff, between the board and the executive, and with stakeholders and customers, and so on.

Absolutely. So what, what are the th- because I could not agree more. Communication is key to culture, and culture is key to communication. They, they go hand in hand. So I'm wondering in your experience, either what you've seen or what you've done that works well or what you've seen that perhaps hasn't worked so well in terms of building that culture.

I put a lot of effort into planning what I'm s- going to say, how I'm going to say it, form of communication, who's included in it, and what conversations need to be aired I visit, um, for the bank, I visit the branches and have meetings with members and staff. So members are invited to the branch to meet with the chair and have a cup of tea.

It's a really good opportunity to communicate with members. I make sure that, um, I'm my genuine, honest self, but I do talk about the things that, um, are in line with the organisation's purpose. So I have given thought already to what things, what topics I want to raise, what questions I might want to ask, and be genuine.

That's an opportunity for clear communication with members to get people on board with things like the, the merger vote and to hear what's important to them. But it's, it's also about meeting with staff and making sure the staff understand that you're interested in what they're doing. So having a chat to them before the meeting with members, you know, "How are things going?"

What are you-- what challenges are you facing?" Um, being genuine and being interested in, in what's important to them. That impacts culture. After those meetings, I'll always send a thank you card to the branch, name the staff, and thank them, something that related to that particular meeting. Thank them for the effort that they took to host me and to host members.

I think it's just a, a genuine way of showing gratitude and that, that has a positive impact on culture also.

That is lovely. An actual-- Like, are you talking an actual card that actually goes in the, in the post- Yeah, we don't do it very often, do we?

No. Yep, I mean, a postcard because I think that's, it's better than an email, isn't it?

Oh my God, it's so much better than an email. Although makes me wonder how long it sits in the letterbox before they pick it up. But that is lovely. Yeah. Yeah, right. Well- And do you- It's

just genuine ... so

do you go to the branches on-- Like how often is this happening? Uh, is this when board meetings happen there or just when there's a- No.

How-

No, just once. I do it with the organisation and plan afternoon tea or morning tea with members. So just once a year at each branch or more often, as has been the case lately, in order to ask members to, you know, come and engage about the, the proposed merger. But something I've seen that I want to talk about that maybe your listeners have experienced themselves is in a board where the chair's focus is just on running good meetings, and that's far from an-- that's far from enough because

the impacts -- the chair can impact The culture outside the ballroom, boardroom, not ballroom, just as much, positively and negatively. So your listeners may have seen or been on a board where the board chair arrives at the company's premises and goes straight into the boardroom, has the meeting, and at the end exits the building as quietly as they arrived.

Um, I've just... It, it doesn't support a positive culture for the organisation, and the message it may give, and my point is that even lack of communication sends a message. The message it may give is that the work that the staff do and what matters to them is of no interest to the board.

I u- I was formerly on a hospital board, and we would often do walk-arounds, um, s- before a board meeting, and the CEO there often just described that as just listening to the walls, listening to what's going on.

Sometimes just sitting in the cafe- Yep ... or getting the lift. Yes. Yep. Um, sometimes people know who you are, and sometimes they don't, and sometimes that's good, you know- Yeah ... because you just hear in the lift- Yes ... oh, I'm... You know, from a patient about the good thing that happened in the p- car park. The guy who ran the car park was awesome, and everyone always loved him.

So you often heard that in the lifts, but you might also hear the opposite of that. So yeah, spending that time just being there.

Listening. Yes. I spent eight years on the, uh, Western New South Wales Local Health District Board, and that board communicated with, um, both patients and staff around the district.

Each month, the board meeting was held at a different facility, and we, we as directors intentionally had to go and give, uh, sorry, go and give opportunity for staff to talk to us or for patients. So we called it rounding. Um, and so if you, you know, went and had a chat to someone in the ward or one of the staff members and bring back to the board meeting afterwards some reflections about those conversations, what we heard at that facility, just to test the water, I guess.

Yes. Yeah. That's right, and it's, there's layers and layers of the c- communication, isn't there? There's the kind of... In fact, I even, I think, heard you said, say before, um, did you say that your weekly... Well, I was going to say your weekly meeting with the CEO, but that makes it sound like it's a scheduled thing.

Yes. And if I heard you right, yes- Unscheduled ... so tell me more. Is that just when, when needed you just pick up the phone? Tell me, how does that happen? Yeah.

Um, I think I accept that my workload during the week varies depending what's going on, and I suspect the same is true for him. So I guess if I haven't reached out during the week, I usually get a phone call on a Friday Right.

From him Interesting But we, yeah, we just touch base with each other pretty much every week. Um, even if there's not a lot to say, it might be just, "How are you going?" You know? How, for me to ask how he's going particularly. It shows that you care. Sh- shows that you're interested and that you care, and that's an- another opportunity for communication that we just talked about, going around to, um, the sites of an organisation.

It's important, I think, just, not just for the board chair, but even directors to arrive early at a office and just take a walk around. Ask the staff what they're working on, you know, what are their challenges. And if you know something, if you've heard in the board about something good that's happened, a project that's just been finished, for example, or even the end of, you know, end of completion of annual report or something, like, thank the team and recognize them because it's, it's makes a difference to how much I enjoy my job as

well as impacting staff and hopefully in, um, adding to the positive culture of the organisation.

Absolutely. So then I'm also wondering, uh, because someti- it, it, it can be quite a fuzzy line, shall we say, for board members or chairs of boards roaming around and talking directly to staff.

Yes.

Sometimes that's a good thing.

Yep.

Sometimes it's not necessarily a good thing. I'm wondering how you, um, ensure that it stays on the good and constructive side-

Yep

uh, for both yourself and for your board directors.

Yes. Absolutely. And it depends on the organisation as to how much they're willing for you to do that. Um, but I think you're more of a listener in those occasions, listening to them rather than giving them information about what's going on at the board level.

The risk is that s- staff can give you feedback, and this might have been the case when you were, um, traveling around hospitals. They can give you feedback, or patients can give you feedback about something they would like changed, and you don't want to give them the impression that just because you're on the board, you can fix any of it.

But you, you recognize it, you accept it, you listen, and you say, "You know, I'm not able to act on it, but I definitely will take it back and talk about it."

Yeah. Absolutely. Yes. Yes. It's true. Uh, once people know you're on the board and you're in the lift or in the cafe or whatever, you are often cornered- Yeah

quite frankly, about particular things. And, and that's okay. In fact, that's good. As you say, it's just ensuring that there are some good boundaries around what can be done with that.

Yep.

Yeah. Okay. I

think that it's important you give people the opportunity to talk to you. You gotta, you need to be open and transparent.

Yes. Yes. What about externally? We've talked a lot about internal communication with staff, with the CEO, with the CoSec, with other board directors, and so on. What about when external communication comes in?

Um, so external communication would be, um... an example would be the talking to patients in a health facility Those, you need to be thoughtful about that.

But I guess for the bank, it's about communicating with, um, members and regulators. Um, and with the regulators it does, that absolutely requires planning. So I always, uh, spend time writing copious notes about the things that I can talk about, and obviously working with management to scope out those dot points.

And I'm wondering, you know, good communication, planned communication, um, building the culture, all of those things, they are all incredibly important. Uh, it doesn't always go as smoothly as we had hoped. Absolutely. I'm wondering if there's, in as much detail as you're willing to share, I'm wondering if there's any examples you're able to share where perhaps, uh, it was a bit trickier or ch- more challenging than you would've hoped.

Yeah, absolutely. Um, so often as chair you receive communications from others, be it, um, emails and letters from members of the, or, or of the organisation. And I always like to reply myself, but I'll take guidance from management on what things I can say. Um, but on one occasion I received communication by email from another director, and this was a challenge because the director Had seen the minutes of a committee meeting and was questioning the decision made by that committee.

It was a committee that the person wasn't a part of. Um, so I replied by email with the reasons that, uh, for the decision by the committee and also said that it was, um, better if that director raised his view at the next board meeting. But the next day, another email arrived, which was even more cranky and more arguments about why the director didn't agree with the decision of the committee.

So I, yeah, I found this challenging because you have to balance maintaining respect and good governance, um, being aligned with the board's code of conduct and keeping the board together. Um, so it was important that I responded as the chair, but I had to note that the chair's only one voice on the board or the committee, and I can influence the decision, but I'm not responsible for decisions.

So I think in that moment, um, holding firm, but listening, it's a bit challenging because you, you sort of can take it per... I took it a bit personally. Um, but I needed to be consistent, and I needed to refer to the board's code of conduct, and I had to remind everyone at the next meeting that, um, they needed to raise things in meetings and not outside of it, unless it's a request for more information.

You know, sometimes it might be a heads-up prior, "Hey Chair, heads up, I'm going to raise this at the meeting," but that is very difficult to, "Grr, I'm angry- Yes ... about all of this, and you need- Yes ... to go and fix it for me."

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, and as I've said before, it's really important to be transparent and be consistent, but you also have to avoid any inni- inner circles, um, and make sure that you shine a light on anything that's not consistent with the culture.

I mean, rumours- That's right ... are a good example of that. Just Bring it to the surface and talk about it.

Absolutely. Yes. Well, look, that probably segues this beautifully as well. Like, uh, we'd talked about good communication builds culture, you know, it builds that transparency, it builds the good things. What happens when it all goes wrong?

What are some of the impacts of, of poor communication? When it's- Not that will never have been in your bailiwick, Fiona. It's not in your boards. Well, it's- But what have you seen- Thank you ... in other boards?

Things go wrong. Um, it can affect the decision-making, can't it? I mean, if the, the board or board chair or the committee chair works with the executive prior to a meeting to frame the upcoming decisions and the discussions.

So if the board doesn't have the right information or sufficient information or doesn't understand the context in which those decisions are being made, then the decisions can be ill-informed or they can be, you know, not aligned to the risk appetite. So poor communication or poor planning of, of, um, framing those conversations can work, uh, against, work out in, uh, suboptimal decision-making.

Um, also, if your messages are unclear or inconsistent or not, not timed correctly, then people can walk away with a different understanding of what the priorities are or what was actually decided even. You certainly don't want the same issues coming up again, um, being reprosecuted because you didn't talk about the so what and the what next.

I'm thinking about a board I've been on at... Yep. Anyway. Where something felt like it just kept coming around again. I'm like, "Haven't we talked about this? Why are we doing this again?" Yes. Because it wasn't clear. Yeah. Yeah. Yep.

Yep.

Yeah. And the- Interesting ...

you need to be alert to that during the meeting, and you might need to reanchor people by reminding the meeting of the key question they're there to discuss and then summarize where they've landed so far so that you can move it forward.

Oh, gosh, being a chair, it's tricky, isn't it? Because you need to manage all of these things and sometimes have the difficult conversations as well.

Yep. And you need your, your chair hat, and you also need your director's hat. So you've got different roles, um, in the same space.

But it's loads of fun, isn't it?

Absolutely. Absolutely, I love it. I really like my job, and it helps that I work in all the boards with awesome people who are dedicated to the purpose of the organisation. The

organisations I'm on the board of all have a purpose, and, um, and the, the board and the executive and the staff are all committed to that purpose.

So it, it makes it a good place to be.

Yes. And I'm sure they, they see that in you as well. I think you touched on earlier about that genuineness and authenticity, and it's ... Everything I've he- hearing from you, it shines on through. Like, you know, sending handwritten cards afterwards and so on, that is such a, as you say, a positive culture builder.

So it sounds like- Yeah ... there is loads-

Provided it's genuine ... all of that. Provided it's genuine.

Absolutely. Yeah. People can tell when it's not.

Yeah.

Most definitely. Yep.

And look, the ... And we talked about when things go wrong. I think in that o- example I gave before, it r- I was reminded that I don't have to be liked, but I have to be respected.

So it's to make sure you, you, you're not trying to be the peacekeeper all the time, but you, you do have to be respected. Yeah, definitely. So call things out, um, if you have to, but, and listen, listen to, um, people's views, but work to a resolution.

Oh, Fiona, so much good stuff in here. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Well, the key message for me, it works for me. Everyone's different, but for me, I need to plan my communication. So the time I spend thinking about- Who I'm talking to, what I'm going to talk about, is it who needs to be included, um, you know, what I, what do I want to get out of the communication is important. I think thoughtful planned communication isn't soft stuff.

I think it's good governance, and it impacts alignment, it impacts decision quality, as we talked about, it impacts trust, it impacts your meeting effectiveness, it impacts accountability if, uh, it's not clear who's accountable for what, and it can impact reputation of the organisation. So really important to do communication well because it enables things.

If communication's done poorly, it undermines things, so.

Takes time to do that, all of those things. And I, I love it's not the soft stuff. I, um, oh, it's a few years ago now, but I had Leah Method on the podcast. She'd just written a book about something like soft is the new hard or because soft skills are not that soft at all.

Yeah, and I think communication's not just a leadership skill. It, it is actually a governance control.

Absolutely. Ooh, a governance control. I like that. Okay. And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

There's plenty of things online, um, today, but I, I get free webinars or access free webinars and information from, um, BoardPro and also Conscious Governance There's an- a PricewaterhouseCoopers, PwC, put out things from time to time, and there's a August 25 Mastering Boardroom Com- Communication: Five Essentials for Executives.

And I liked this one because it's the perspective of the executive in talking to the board, which I thought, well, that's good because if I can think about what, how they're approaching it, then I can think about how the board's approaching the same conversation.

Oh, I love it. Yes. Excellent. Well, we will dig out all of those resources and make sure there is a link in the show notes to them all.

Fiona, thank you for your- Most welcome, Helga ... wise words. Oh, so lovely- Thanks, Helga ... to have this conversation. Who'd have thought that a, that a podcast about communication would be well communicated? Who would know? So thank you so much for taking the time to plan, uh, your conversation about, um, communication and for all that you do for the organisations you're involved in.

It is, um, it is, has... As I say, you were nominated for this to be the, uh, to be on the pod for this, so it is not unnoticed. So thank you so much for all that you do- Thanks, Helga ... and for sharing your wisdom with us today. Oh,

thanks so much for, for talking to me and making space for people like me to talk. I listen to the podcast, so it's, it's nice to be sharing.

Oh, love it. Well, thank you for being here.

Thanks very much.

So that's a wrap for the Take on Board podcast today. Thank you for being here and for being part of the community. I do this podcast because I love bringing good women and gender diverse peoples together. So I invite you to join us over in the Take on Board Facebook group, an active group that helps, supports, and cheer squads each other.

Just search Take on Board in Facebook to find us. Or you might like to let me know your email address, and you'll then have the Take on Board times and the Take on Board Community Digest delivered straight to your inbox. You'll also get advance notice of events and programs so you can meet others in the community.

Finally, I'd really love it if you could do some of the podcast things. Share this podcast with someone you know who you think might get some value from it. Subscribe if you haven't

already, either on podcast or over on YouTube. And I also love it when people rate and review. Thanks again for being part of the Take on Board community.

Now go and put these tips, tricks, and advice into action so you can be your best in the boardroom.

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