



Transcript – Navigating Diversity: Gabrielle Trenbath's Journey in Board Governance

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Gabrielle Trenbath about her journey to the boardroom, and we'll probably touch on disability inclusion 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 unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

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 in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. Now, let me tell you about Gabrielle. Gabrielle is on the boards of National Disability Services Board and Hartley Life Care.

She's previously been on the boards of Avivo, Disability Service Commission, The Pat Giles Centre for Non Violence, and Music for Canberra. Gabrielle is a non-executive director with seven years governance experience across community and human services. A graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and a chartered secretary, she works in the Australian Public Service in diversity, equity and inclusion, bringing lived experience of disability and a strong focus on strategy and impact.

Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Gabrielle. Thank you. It is so good to have you here. And whilst I'm very keen to dive on into your story, I also want to dive a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me, where were your parents born, and do you know where your ancestors are from? My mother is, uh, from this s- French part of Switzerland, and, uh, my dad is, uh, English.

Um, and h- uh, he's very English from... Like, his family is totally English. But my grandmother on my maternal side, she's also... She was Dutch, so I have a bit of a, a pan-European family. And, and because, uh, my grandma's family were involved with the Dutch Trading Company, they also... And there's also some Chinese, Indonesian blood way back several centuries ago Okay.

All right. So we've got a really interesting mix in there, as you say, pan-European- Yeah ... and a little bit of Asia as well. So for you, where did you... Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Tell me about any siblings you might have. I was born in Canberra, but, um, I left when I was about one years old, and I grew up in England.

And, um, uh, long s- kind of complicated. I moved to Perth when I was f- 10 for about six months, and again when I was 15, and we thought it was only going to be six months, but it turned out to be a lot longer, and I ended up staying. And when I was 21, I wanted to go back to where I came from, what, what I thought was where I came from, like, 'cause I grew up British, and, and so I felt English at that point.

And, um, so I went to, like, England for a year and a half as a 21-year-old, backpacking, and ended up working in Burger King for £4.15 an hour. And, and it was very character building, and, and it was just it was fabulous and, but, and also travelling around and doing lots of exciting things, so. And then, uh, it all got too hard, and I ended up, uh, moving back to Perth.

And then, uh, four years ago, um, got a job in Canberra, and the rest is history. Oh, gosh. So you've grown up all over the place, so this next question, take it however you like, as narrow or broadly. Yes. You know, some of the places you grew up are in Australia and some are in England, so the first peoples are a bit different in Australia as compared to in England.

So yeah, do you know the name of the traditional owners or the first peoples of the various places you grew up? In Perth it's the Noongar people. Um, and then in Canberra it's the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. Lovely. Okay. Yes. And just out of interest, uh, and I only speak one language, but how many languages do you speak, Gabrielle?

I grew up speaking French, like as a young child, but I got, uh, too hard to keep going, um, so once I started school. Um, so but I can unders- I can understand French better than I can speak it. But I, when I go there on holiday I, I, I get, it's good enough to get by. But even though it's, uh, sometimes, uh, what, what comes out is in, uh, grammatically incorrect.

But they get what I mean usually. Yeah, that's right. Interesting. I'm again, I'm- Yes ... I'm heading, long after Canberra, I'm heading to Cam- uh, not Canberra, Canada later in the year. Yes. And I don't speak a word of French, so that's going to be interesting for- Yes ... the, um, east side, which is... Anyway. Oh, yeah, yeah.

I'll work it out. Yeah, yeah. You've grown up in a whole bunch of different places, so I'm wondering now, what, where do you consider your place or your home? I don't know. It's, it's a tough one. Mm. Yeah. It's, um, I think I'm, I'm very much a Canberran now. Um, yes, I, I like, I love Canberra. It's a great place to live and, uh, it's a beautiful part of the world.

And, yeah, I j- yeah, it's a tough one. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I think it is... I'm not sure I could even choose one place that is home. I mean, I could probably say- Yeah ... Melbourne broadly, but even within Melbourne it feels like there's a lot of different places. That's right. It is a tough one. Yeah. But sometimes I feel that home is where my mum is, so, um, uh, because she's, she's the queen of our family really.

Aw. So where's she? Oh, in, in Perth with my dad. Yes. Okay. All right, so you gotta go head over there regularly. Yes. Okay. Thank you. I always love to hear a bit more about the person that we have in front of us. We know that board directors, you know, we're- Fully formed people in a whole range of different ways.

So being able to hear a bit of the story is incredibly useful. Yeah. Uh, but I now want to turn to your boardroom journey. I'm not sure. Where should we start this story, Gabrielle? I think first of all, I, I kind of have to acknowledge that I have cerebral palsy and I'm neu- also neurodivergent. Um, and, and it's, it's like the backdrop of, um, of everything, n- but not in a poor me kind of, uh, way, but in a real practical way.

And w- I w- as I was growing up, I always had my intellect questioned and my a- ability underestimated, and I still remember being told that I could n- never go to university. So, uh, from pretty early on, uh, I, I learnt that if I wanted something, I probably was going to have to want it louder than the, um, doubt around me.

And, um, but eventually I made it to uni, and I loved it, and, um, I was obsessed with the big picture politics and international relations and how economics and culture shape lives and impact people. And, um, but after graduation, uh, it was a, I hit a, um, a frustrating gap that being qualified, um, between being qualified and being seen as e- employable.

And I really struggled with, um, uh, interviews and getting jobs. So during my 20s, I, like, uh, uh, washed dishes. I, um, worked, you know, flipped burgers in England. I, uh, I did a aged care course, and I worked in aged care and in hospitals. And, um Uh, and it, e- even tr- I tried so hard to get a job, but it just was really, really hard.

And so, but I also kept on studying so, and during the final semester of my first master's degree, I did a, uh, a traineeship to become a nursing assistant, and that opened, uh, a door to permanent stable work, and that really changed... allowed me to m- uh, move out of home and do all this wonderful stuff that everyone else was, um, able to do.

And then, um, I applied to do a leadership course, um, for people with disabilities through Leadership WA, and it was in that process that they suggested that I apply to a board. And, um, and so, um, I did that and I got appointed to Avivo. And, and it was... The, the rest is history. It was, it was, it was life-changing, really.

So tell me about, you joined the board of Avivo. I want to dig into that a wee bit. Yes. So first up, how long ago are we talking when you joined the board of Avivo in WA? Uh, 10 years ago. Okay. Uh, yes, about 10 years in it, yeah. Tell me about your first board meeting, if you can remember that far back. It's a fair while ago.

I thought I was an alien coming in from out, uh, into another planet. It was like, "What is this?" Like, how, h- what... Like, 'cause I just was... I, I think I came in my nurse's uniform straight from work. So it was just like, it was such a mind flip, like, going from, um, doing bedpans to, to... Not that that's anything wrong with doing bedpans.

But doing that and then doing to the boardroom where apparently I had to be across, uh, uh, finances and had to ask- Yes ... big questions. And it was, it w- But it was, it was, it was, it was great. It was fabulous. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. And, um, I, I think after that initial, um, uh, shock, I, I really found my f- my feet, and I loved it.

And what helped you find your feet in that? You know? You, you've come in, and you've... Yeah, it flips everything upside down. What helped you find your feet? Yes. I guess time and doing... The

more board meetings, the more I felt like I, I belonged. And I think just doing courses like the AICD course and other things like that, um, h- helped me to understand the reasons and the processes behind, behind, uh, the process and, yeah, and the reality.

Yeah. I'm interested to dig into this, and tell me if I'm going down the wrong path here. Yeah. But I heard you say earlier that, um, you know, you've been underestimated your whole life. And just in that moment I heard you say you really felt like you belonged. Yes ... when you hit the boardroom, because I think you were talking about your earlier life when you said you'd been underestimated- Yeah

when you hit the boardroom, were you also underestimated there? And if so, how did it get from underestimated to belonging? Uh, also I should mention that, uh, Avivo had in their, I think their policies they have, they require two people with disability to be on the board at, all times, so that's how I got on to it, uh, initially.

'Cause if I had, um, just applied to, um, any board, like I wouldn't have no way, no way at all to be able to get onto a board. Like, no experience, no professional, professional experience. Um, I was just a nursing assistant. Like why would, why would I have something to offer over someone who was an accountant or, or, or a lawyer or something?

I mean, yes, and I know, I know, uh, that might come across as, like patronising or something. But, um, that's just the reality, that lawyers and accountants get pi- or people with, uh, professional experience get picked- Yeah ... over people who just have to work to live- Mm, that's true ... and keep the country going.

That's true. Yeah. So... Although it's interesting, isn't it? It is generally the case. And I, look, I do think most boardrooms- Yes ... definitely they have a finance person, and lots of- Yeah ... boardrooms have a lawyer, not all of them. Yeah. But of course we need oh so much more than that- Exactly ... in the boardrooms, and particularly modern boardrooms, the boardrooms of today.

So again, and please tell me if I'm, I'm framing this poorly, basically. But- No, no ... I wonder whether sometimes then in the boardroom there is, um, or you're just the lived experience person And getting from inverted, heavy inverted commas, "Just the lived experience person" Yes ... because I think it's so much more than that, but I think that's sometimes how it's perceived.

Yeah. How do you move to, "No, I am an equal member of the board here, and my views are just as impactful and important as lawyer and accountant and whoever else is in here"? Yeah. Uh, I think sometimes that's, um, uh, a habit or, or, or it's a tendency. It can, that can happen. But, um, uh, I think, uh, as time went on, uh, I became more confident, and, um, I think also after, uh, doing the AICD course and the g- uh, government institute course, it was just like, "Well, I'm just the same as you, just I've got...

You know, I have- I do shift work, and I work- Yes ... as a nursing assistant," and it's... Yeah. So it's, yeah. So, um, you join the board. You turn up from your f- your nursing shift, bedpans to the boardroom, and then you, at some stage, was it during your first board role that you did the company directors course? Yes, yes.

Okay. I got a scholarship from the Australian government to, to do it, and I was very lucky and very privileged. Great. And- Okay ... but it was the b- And- The best, best thing I ever did, and more useful than my degrees Mm. Almost. Okay. Yes. Yes. All right. And it gave you, by the sounds of things, like, the level playing field in the boardroom.

Yes. That's right. And I'm interested as well, you said there was... So Aviva always had two, uh, lived experience people in the boardroom. Yes. Um, so did you and the other person join the board at the same time, or had the other person been on the board- No ... for a while? How does- Yes ... yeah, tell me more. Well, they were on, uh, a board, on, on the board for a while.

Okay. Yeah. Okay. Okay. And then, so then you join as the new person- Yes ... um, which I do think is helpful having... I mean, I would like to see all boardrooms with all manner of diversity in the boardroom, but I do think particularly for lived experience, it is good to have more than one- Yes ... so that whenever something- Yes

comes up, they're not all just turning to you, "So Gabrielle- Yes ... tell me, what do people- Exactly ... with a disability think?" It's like- Yes ... "Well, I'm one." That's right. Exactly, yes. I think that's a very important thing to remember, and I think that's what, uh, Christina Ryan said in her, uh, conversation with you, that, well, that's one of the things that she brought up.

So yes, I completely agree with that. Yeah, absolutely. So how do you think that board, or even boards that you've been on since- Yeah ... how does it change the way, what they do, having you in the boardroom? I guess it just makes it more, uh, real, and, um, it's a tough one though, because I, I, I know that my life is, uh, has been quite privileged, and I'm not typical of the, uh, traditional, um...

Yeah, I'm v- I'm a very privileged person, and so my life experience has been very different to, to other people. But, uh, yes. But it, it does. I'm just, just not sh- sure if I'm able to articulate it. Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? I'm- It just... I guess, uh, it offers the, um, uh, nuance to any conversation. Yeah. And it's interesting your reflection about, uh...

And again, tell me if I'm putting words in your mouth. Yeah. But I think what I'm hearing is you're saying you're relatively privileged, uh, compared to some people with a disability. Yes. I wonder if, ugh, I mean, let's face it, boardrooms- Yeah ... are often full of people with privilege. Yes. A- and maybe therefore, this, again, I hope I'm not framing things in the wrong way, but maybe it is the more privileged people with a disability or the more privileged- Yes

people of colour or the more privileged- Yes ... women, even when it, women, you know, and so on- Yeah ... that would, would enter the boardroom, and then once the women and people of colour and people with a disability and so on are in, they can then broaden the base. Yeah, I think so. Yes. But it, it, it's, um... The bigger challenge is, um, because, uh, uh, uh, for example, lots of people, lots of boards require their, uh, directors to have, like, the AICD course.

But, um, oh, not only is it expensive, uh, sure there ex- uh, there are, uh, scholarships, but they're, they're very competitive to get. And so if you don't- Absolutely You don't have, um, you can't get a scholarship. It's h- how you're going to pay for it. It's that, but also it's, it's insanely difficult. It's, uh, uh, 'cause the standard, it, like I think the pass mark when, when I did it was 65%.

And, and lots of people failed, including me, but I had the, uh, the ability to pay for the resets. And so, and, and pa- and eventually pass. So like if you don't have, have that, then how are you going to- Absolutely ... ha- yeah. Yeah. I- So it's, it's very complicated ... I confess it frustrates me no end when board advertisements for any sorts of organisations say- Yeah

you know, AICD, GAICD or equivalent. I just think- Yeah ... yeah, not everyone can afford 10 grand and five days off, and exam- Yes ... university type studying- Yeah ... doesn't suit everybody. I think it's very- Yeah ... exclusionary. Yes. I mean it's, it's, it's very complicated, uh, discussion. Uh, uh- It is ... yeah. I know. Yeah. But- It is.

I wish, I wish there was a magic wand. Um- That's right ... I'm reflecting, a, a, years ago now, gosh, I think it's four years ago, maybe even more, I interviewed Lisa Anese, who at the time was the CEO of the Diversity Council of Australia. She's now moved on to- Yes ... other roles. But it was around class diversity in the boardroom- Yes.

Yeah ... because the Diversity Council of Australia at the time had just done some reach- research around class diversity, and that if you have class diversity anywhere, in the workplace, in the boardroom, in the footy club, wherever it may be, then you are much more likely to have all of the other diversity as well.

Uh, 'cause it levels the playing field, I guess, in a way that, that other diversity does not. Which I, has always, as you can tell, it stuck with me for years. I think it's a really interesting way. And I think we're making progress around people with a disability and LGBTQIA+ and- Yes, yes, and Indigenous ... women of colour, and I'm not- Yeah

yes, and First Nations- Uh, yes ... but I'm not sure- Yes, definitely ... we are making progress around class. No, yeah. Definitely not. No, that's right. Mm. Yeah. I think that's the last one of the, um, ones that's often gets ignored, and I completely agree with you. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I wonder what we can do anyway. I- Yeah

we'll pop it on the list of things that we need to, we need to do. Yeah. In fact, I should go back, note to self, I'm going to go back to the Diversity Council and just see if they've updated the research- Hmm ... 'cause honestly, that was years ago. Yes. So- Yes ... I'm wondering. So Gabrielle, you've got loads of experience now.

We've, we've focused on Avivo back as your first role, but since then, the Disability Services Commission, the Pat Giles Centre for Nonviolence, Music for Canberra, National Disability Services, Hartley Lifecare, all sorts of organisations. I'm wondering what are your reflections about- You know, what your presence brings to the boardroom, what, what your representation brings to the boardroom I think what gets noticed and what gets, uh, dis- discussed and assumptions and, um, ideas about people with disabilities and...

'Cause even those, those working in the sector, I guess we all have i- ideas about what a disabled person can and can, cannot do. And so, um, my presence, I guess, challenges that. Uh, and also, um, provides some nuance in the discussion about the services that, uh, is, um, providing and, uh, discussions about what we can and cannot do.

Absolutely. I imagine for... I keep going back to Avivo. I'm sorry. I'm su- I'm sure it's been- Yeah, that's- ... the case in many of the other organisations too, but, you know, it sounds like Avivo had two p- how long had they had two people with a disability in the boardroom, basically? And the other organisations- Uh-

you've been part of, how long has that been in place? Avivo was, I think, quite a long time. I don't know how long exactly, but quite a long time. And, um, and, uh, NDS, National Disability Services, I think, um, uh, three of us got appointed recently, or two of us got appointed, I think, last year. So- Yeah, right ... that was relatively new, new, um- Interesting, isn't it?

Yeah. It seems like- Yeah ... such a... Yeah, like it's a good thing really, isn't it? Yes. That's right. Yeah. So that's great. Avivo sound like they were ahead of their time, which- Yes ... it should just be a normal thing, but it actually sounds like they were ahead of their time. That's right. And then when you left that board- Yes

what was the process for bringing on the next person behind you? I think they had a, um, the, uh, an advert that they went out that said, oh, that's specific- like a identified position advert that we are, where they were looking. And so I w- I went around to all the people that I knew that would be g- a good fit and tapped them on the shoulder and really encouraged them to apply.

And, um- Go on it ... uh, yes, so now they've, uh, got, um, fabulous, uh, person, uh, Erin. She's, she's great, and she's killing it in the boardroom, and it's good to see other people having such a s- such an impact. Oh, I love it. Fantastic. Yes. Oh, Gabrielle, so many awesome things we have touched on here about your journey to the boardroom and about why it matters.

Yeah. What are the main things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today? Um, I guess that, um, that there, there are many programs out there that have, um, that are helping people, uh, get, um, to, into the boardroom, like the Observership Program and, and I think, um, the AIC, uh, w- um, and the Observership Program, and other people.

There's like a consortium that help, uh, specifically help people with disabilities get on boards. But, um, and, and they're great. And then in, um, needs to be, um, um, the funding for those programs need to be continued. But also the people that do n- uh, have done them need to be picked up and, and encouraged to actually be on boards and not just, um, you know, just, yeah.

So there needs to be a p- a pi- a stronger pipeline of people getting, um... Yes. And they need to advertise better and just really encourage people and look f- past the, uh, people's individual circumstances or, or job titles and see what, um, they can do and the th- what they bring- Yes ... to the boardroom. Yeah.

Beyond the bedpan, huh? Yes, that's right. Beyond the nurse's uniform and the bedpan- Yes. That's right. Yes ... to what you really bring to the boardroom. Yeah. Yes, that's right. That is... Yeah, it's... I tend to agree, and I think some of the programs, I think the Observership Program's doing a, a reasonable job around- Yeah

the pipeline past that program. Um- Yeah ... and probably some of the others, like Christine Ryan's organisation, Disability Leadership Institute- Yes, that's right. Yes ... I think, you know, there's a

number of organisations. Yes. In fact, if you happen to have a list of some of the organisations, Gabrielle, we can put a link in the show notes to some of them.

Oh, sure. Um, I will definitely- Okay ... for Disability Leadership Institute, and I will for the- Yes ... Board Observership Program, but if there's others- Yes ... just let me know. Yes. Will do. In fact, speaking of resources, is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community? Uh, yes. Uh, well, N- D- NDS have some, uh, resources on their website, and I think I sent you the link.

And so- All right ... and they've got lots of resources, um, uh, uh, both in, in, um, PDF form and, um, Word form, and also easy, um, English. And so, um, it, they've got s- um, quite a lot of details and resources available to, uh, uh, on how to, uh, make your boardroom more inclusive. Oh, that is fantastic. I will take a look at that.

And I'm smiling really at easy English. I mean, why isn't easy English just the standard? It is good for everyone, really- Yeah ... having easy English. So that is fantastic. I will definitely make sure there is a link to that in the show notes, folks. So there will be a- Yes ... a bunch of links. Um, and if people have other references or resources that you think are handy, please get in touch and we can always add to the list as well.

Yeah Oh, Gabrielle, thank you. So fabulous to have you on the podcast today, and for you to share some of your story and experience and resources and wisdom with the Take on Board community today. Yeah. I really appreciate you taking the time to be with us today. Yeah, it's been a- Thank you ... pleasure. Thank you very much

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