

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 382

Transcript – Working Through Boardroom Dysfunction with Heather Campbell

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 Heather Campbell, well, about working your way through boardroom dysfunction. Not like that ever happens. Hmm. Or maybe it does.

Before we start the podcast today, I would 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 their elders past and present. I'd also like to pay my respects to any First Nations people who may be listening or watching today. 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 here in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Heather, could you introduce yourself to the Take on Board community?

Yeah, absolutely. Uh, hello. Really lovely to be with you today and to be on this, uh, podcast with you today, Helga. And, uh, so I live in Glasgow, Scotland. And, uh, what I would say is that despite the name Heather Campbell, which is of course incredibly Scottish, and my accent, which is of course incredibly Scottish, I am in fact Irish. Having said that, having grown up in Ireland, I grew up in a part of Ireland where, uh, the accent is very Scottish. So for many years I lived in England.

At that stage, I had never spent any time in, in Scotland, but everybody assumed I was in fact from Scotland, even at that point. So I, I guess I'm very close to, um, to, have very close roots in Scotland as well as, uh, as in Ireland. And of course I'm very aware that here in the British Isles we're a tiny, tiny, um, land mass or area compared to all of your, your listeners in Australia and further afield. So sometimes I feel we are right out here, kind of on the, on the edge of Europe now.

So hello from, uh, from far away. Um, uh, when I moved to Scotland, I've been in Scotland now for about 25 years, so a lifetime actually. And, uh, one of the things I loved about it as soon as I moved here was the sense of the, the humour and the approach to life is so similar from S- between

Scotland and Ireland. So clearly a lot of people, um, swam past each other as they moved from one, one part of the British Isles to the next. Um, in terms of the work that I do, I work globally.

I, I used to travel a huge amount and I guess in that sense, um, my work changed a lot after COVID. So most of my work now is actually done from my office here in Glasgow. Uh, which, which it makes life much easier to balance. Um- My focus in terms of, uh, working with boards actually began because I was working so much with CEOs and C-suites, and often the challenges that the CEOs were bringing to me w- they, they were all around how do I deal with the chair?

I've got a terrible chair. Uh, the board, we have so much pressure from the board. And that began my, um, my interest in the board. My work with the board and with the C-suite is all around relationships, power dynamics, fear, uh, anger, all of the emotions that can come up in this, what can be a very tense And naturally confrontational relationship, and yet one that is so crucial to the success of the organisation. So that's, that's some of my background, and it's actually good to be here with you today, Helga.

Oh, lovely. Thanks, Heather. Yeah. Hmm. Relationships, power, fear, and anger. I definitely want to dig into some of that. Yeah. And look, what, whilst I definitely want to dig into the topic, we always do a bit of a background question. Now, we've heard a little bit about your background, which is fabulous, and this gives us a little hint about what might come here. But I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit about young Heather that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Yeah. Absolutely. Uh, so I grew up, as I say, in, in Northern Ireland. I'm the youngest of a family of five, and, uh, the youngest by quite a, a long way. So that meant that around the family dinner table, and, and when I was growing up, we very much sat around the family dinner table and had conversations, etc. Um, and, uh, I guess for me at that time, being the youngest, I was really aware of how to f- how to speak up, how to f- how to be the person that was part of everything.

Now, I, I had a fantastic family. It's not as if they, um, as if they were excluding me on purpose. But I was young, and often you'd say something, um, and it was almost talked over or i- it didn't fit in with the conversation. So I think that sense of how do I communicate, how do I say what I want to say, probably began to drive a lot of my interest in finding my place, finding my bo- my voice. And that actually impacted me for a very long time, even as an adult, even when I was sitting...

I mean, I now work as a consultant, but when I was in organisations work- sitting at the C-suite table, I would often still find myself anxious about, how do I speak up? So I actually think that, um, all those family conversations around the dinner table were a direct link to why I started to explore communication, power, inclusion, being part of. So that's a little bit about, about the young Heather.

Amazing. Yeah. It's so interesting, isn't it, how those, those stories of our younger days, yeah, there is often a direct link. Um, and in fact- Always ... not to mention, huh, power And sometimes fear within family hierarchies as well. Anyway, let's not go there. Let's turn to the- Uh, and occasional, and occasional anger as well, Helga. Yes. Sometimes we find a bit of anger in families too. Maybe a bit. Absolutely. Yes. Yeah. Absolutely. It's all there. It's all there.

Okay. Well, look, let's then turn to the boardroom because all of those things are boardroom dynamics. We know that strong boardroom dynamics means, you know, the ability to have robust conversations, but it is sometimes a bit of a fine line between a robust conversation and a, I don't

know, a dangerous conversation or dysfunction. So if we think about dysfunctional boardrooms and functional boardrooms, uh, and what makes them work well, where, where should we start that conversation?

Yeah. Well, I guess the place to start is to acknowledge that in general, everyone within the boardroom and everyone within the C-suite is well-intentioned. Let's start from that position. No one is out to do anything other than their very best to get the very best results, and I think that's a really key place to recognise. The thing is, within that, the natural dynamic, the role of the board versus the role of the C-suite creates a natural dynamic that brings in a tendency for confrontation And the power dynamic brings in that sense of, I guess, who has the power around here?

I mean, let's face it, if you put a chair and a, a CEO together, often you will g- get very strong, two strong people, two strong opinions, powerful in terms of the relationships with, uh, others in the organisation, and that power can lead to quite a clash. So if you get the chair and the CEO together, that's the f- that can be the first place that there's potential for tension. Um, but then you put all the board dynamics and all the C-suite dynamics more broadly, bring that together, um, it's a tough place to start from despite good intentions.

Yes. Yes. I think that's right. Although, I think you're right, acknowledging good intentions, um, you know, is, is, is an excellent start, because that's mostly where people are coming from. Absolutely.

So I'm wondering if there's any, any stories, in as much detail as you're able, I'm wondering if there's any stories that you can share, um, from the boardroom around, you know, what's working and what's not working and what to look out for.

Yeah. Absolutely. You know, I work with boards and with C-suites across a wide range of organisations from global, um, organisations listed in the stock exchange through to much smaller, um, maybe national charities, and I see similar dynamics time after time. So the examples I'll share are, they are real examples, but they're not unique to these specific organisations. And of course, I will not mention the name of the organisations themselves.

But if we take one example which really stood out, um, the first time it happened, but as I've seen it many times since, was a situation where a CEO asked me to coach, not a C-suite member, but a, a, a senior vice president who reported into the C-suite. And I was asked to coach this individual specifically on how to present at the board without being too honest.

And what had actually happened was that in a previous board meeting, the individual had gone along. They actually had responsibility for a key area of compliance within the organisation, so really important to the governance of that organisation. It was the first time they'd been to the board. They presented the figures, and they, they'd made two mistakes really. One was they presented the figures Without giving enough background to ameliorate some of the r- tougher stats, and also within the C-suite and indeed with, across some of the board members, they hadn't familiarised individuals with what they were going to be reporting in the first place.

Which meant it caused absolute chaos when it was presented because the, the board, naturally with their responsibility for governance, were anxious, worried, fear came in. So they started to, from the C-suite's perspective, from the CEO's perspective, they started to interfere and ask questions they didn't need to be asking. But of course, from a governance perspective, they felt they did. Um, and

there was huge, um, frustration within the C-suite because they weren't aware of some of these more exposing figures. So I thought really highlighted to me this tension between we have to be transparent, but how transparent should we be?

Yeah. And this is a real dynamic that I see time after time- Mm-hmm ... between the board and the C-suite. Where does transparency get, become too much? So that would be one example.

That is so interesting, isn't it? Like I, I do often hear about what is the right level of information in terms of, oh, the board papers are too long, the board papers are too short, we need more detail, we need less detail, whatever it may be, those sorts of things. It's interesting, though, one about transparency. I don't know that I've ever heard a board saying, "We'd like the, the leadership team to be a little less transparent with us." I don't think I've ever heard that from the boardroom.

You will, the boardroom will never say that. Of course not. Yeah. They want the transparency. They need the transparency for them to fulfil their role. So then- The challenge is the C-suite doesn't want the transparency.

Interesting. So how did that play out then? So you're, you're brought in to basically shut this person down, my words, not yours, right? But you're brought in to train them in how to communicate with the board, which is "Don't tell the board anything." How did you then navigate? Because, I mean, that says to me, quite frankly, there's a bit of an issue with the CEO, if that's the culture of the organisation, and this person's popped in and said, "Oh, here's what's going on." "Don't tell them that.

Don't tell them that." How did you then navigate that? Because it's not really an issue with the director, it's an issue with the CEO.

It was a real challenge. The, and I think the thing we have to look at here when we're thinking about boards and the relationship between the board and the CEO and the C-suite, the actual relationship between the chair and the CEO, and this was a large organisation, the relationship had a lot of friction within it And I think it's very easy for the chair and the CEO, or it's maybe too easy for the chair and the CEO to end up in a difficult relationship. The CEO himself was, and still is, a very effective individual, but there was a fine line for that individual to walk in terms of how the chair would take information.

So I think when we look at this, the, the problem is rarely within one individual. The problem is nearly always between. Between- And a system. It's a system issue. The system. You know? Yeah. It's the system. What's happening between. Yes. And it's the system that becomes the challenge. Okay. Um, and so in working with that, that was one of the, um, first times that I began to work between the board and the C-suite. Look at the space between, and look at the system, and you find where the challenges sit rather than looking at the individual.

So then you're working with the board and the system, and, you know, when things are a little bit dysfunctional, when there's power, when there's anger, when there's fear, uh, you know, I think what I'm hearing reading between the lines there is that the leadership team and the CEO had a fear of providing all of the information because they were just going to get whacked over the head with it, um, because the board held and wielded the power in that way. How do you crack that open?

What's, what's the first step towards function from dysfunction?

It's a really, it's a really good question, and I would say that it, to some extent it depends on where the dysfunction is sitting. But I would say the first step is always to say what is happening within this system? And for me, when you look at what's happening within the system, you then look for powerful words, um, but you look for where's the fear in the system. Where's the fear? Sometimes it's anger, but it's, it's usually fear. Now, when I say fear, people always say, "We're not afraid of ev- anything." And believe me, this is a question I actually love to say to the chair or to say to the CEO, "So what, what are you afraid of?" And I guarantee when you ask that question, they will say, "I'm not afraid of anything." And that's, you know, that's irrespective of, of gender or anything like that.

This isn't about male egos clashing. I f- it's, it's a irrespective of gender, irrespective of organisational size, and we, it's because we hear the word fear is so powerful, and the- we associate it with s- quaking, being really afraid. So what was your... What, what stopped you wanting that information to go to the board? Or you say to the chair, "So what was the reason for your response?" And they'll say, "Well, I was worried. Well, I was just concerned that... Well, I just had the sense that this would go wrong," and people will tell you the fear.

So first step, look at the system, and look for the fear within the system. Those, that's where I would start in every situation.

Oh, it must be difficult because I imagine, as you say, there is this kind Closed, "I'm not afraid of anything, it's all okay." Or, um, you know, "If I provide all that information, they're just going to pull it all apart, or they're just going to whack us over the head," whatever. So then it- Yeah ... it comes to light. But that long, well, I feel like it's a long, slow process then back to rebuilding trust. Um, dismantling the fear and rebuilding trust and belief in those good intentions.

How does that, um, come into play and, and what are some of the building blocks people can use there?

Yeah. Absolutely, and you've clearly been there, Helga, when you say it's a, it's a long process. It's, it's not a... Well, it's a long process if it's had a long time to embed, and often by the time the challenges come to light, they have had quite a long time to embed. Um, so how do you start to un- unravel all of that? What do you actually do with all of that? I think you've got to start with a lot of listening. And, um, I, I, I will name-drop here because I have to say, just earlier this week, I had, um, I had an audience with President Barack Obama.

Now let me make it clear, that audience with President Barack Obama was also with 12,000 other people present. I was at an event where President Barack Obama was, uh, speaking and, uh, he was saying that he's often asked as people are moving forward into presidential roles and, and getting elected, he's, he's, he's asked, "What are the key... What's the key thing? What do I improve?" And he says, "The number one thing is learn to listen. Learn to listen." He said, "It's not learn how to speak.

It's not learn how to get your point across. It's learn how to listen."

So as with any relationship challenge or any tension, you start with listening. Quite often that might be that I'm sitting down with individuals to listen to them to start with. Um, but sometimes if the

relationship hasn't become too deeply entrenched or the, the dysfunction's not too entrenched, and, and generally it isn't. Generally w- I'm not looking here at- Totally broken situations. The, uh, but slight dysfunction gets magnified many times. That's the challenge. Um, so getting them t-to listen to each other, but always saying, "What is it within the system?" Not, "What is it about you?" So let's listen.

What's happening here? What's happening when you bring this?

So if I could give you another example, and in this case, this was actually a, a ch-chair and a board who engaged a lot directly into the organisation, which has pros and cons, and it all depends where the boundaries have agreed to sit. But in this case, the CEO and the C-suite, there, there hadn't been the boundary discussion around how, how do we manage this thing of your governance responsibility for the organisation and our responsibility to be delivering the strategy. Where do the boundaries sit? Where do we think you get involved?

So in this case, the chair and the board regularly were in the organisation. They were very engaged. This was a not-for-profit organisation, again, a large national organisation, but they were very involved, and they would email people within the organisation to get information.

What had happened here was then the CEO and the s- and the C-suite, well, w- they were suspicious. The trust had broken down. What's happening? Why are they asking these questions? Why do they want that direct connection? So here we had to have a lot of, let's sit down and listen without becoming defensive. So for the CEO and the C-suite to be able to say, "We worry." Fear again. "We, we're concerned. What is it you're looking for? Why are you asking the questions?" And so it starts with listening.

It starts without bringing in that defensiveness, which is a natural response. Um, the one thing I would say, finally, is the, the only thing I see that can't be fixed is when there's real anger. Anger is a very different thing. Rarely, I rarely find it in that relationship between the board and the C-suite. But when that occurs, it's a, it's a different thing entirely.

Yeah. Yeah, I think that's probably right. So I'm wondering then, sometimes board members, uh, or even an individual board member can detect dysfunction, and particularly can detect dysfunction po-potentially in that chair-CEO relationship or the chair-board relationship or the chair-anyone relationship. Sometimes board members detect that, and the chair does not. What can board members do to encourage, uh, some of that self-reflection in their chair if the chair is not seeing it themselves?

That's a, a challenge, I would say, for the board member. It's, it is a responsibility. It is a responsibility on their part to raise this. Again, we have the power dynamic. Um, how open is the chair? I mean, the, the last... I think in your last podcast I w- I was listening to Giselle speaking about the, how a chair can, can be an effective chair. Uh, so I guess as we look at this, and acknowledging the power dynamic, it depends for the board member on how open is the chair to feedback.

Because if the chair is not open to feedback, then, well, the, the fact is they're not going to take the feedback. Again, we have to look at the board member in terms of how skilled are they at opening it up, at, at saying what they're observing. Too often, because of the risks that it can involve... I mean, I'm not talking here about major, um The board majorly falling apart. But for any board member

speaking to the chair to say, "I, I notice this, I notice you're doing this," can take, um, it, it, it can ta- it s- can be challenging.

Because what if the chair doesn't like it? What if they don't like what they're hearing? Again, we're into the power dynamics.

Yeah, so I think for the, uh, individual, they really need to be thinking about l- being willing, again, to listen to what does the chair see is happening. Yes. This is, this is simply good feedback dynamics we're looking at here. Yeah. Not assuming that because you've observed it, you are right. Not ob- considering that because you've observed it, the chair has to change. But being able to say, "This is what I'm observing," and understanding what the chair is experiencing. That has to be the, the start point for any conversation around it.

And I would, again, bringing it back to fear, I would always say listen for the fear in what the chair is talking about. Most people when they're confident, when they're not fearful, they will engage in an effective way. I'm not talking about arrogance, I'm simply talking about a confident individual. But the very fact that something's dysfunctional, I say there's fear in the system.

Yeah, interesting. Oh my gosh, Heather, so much in here. What a surprise we can't deal with everything about a dysfunctional board within- ... half an hour. Uh, I'm wondering, from the conversation that we've had today, what are the key things you want people to take away?

Yeah. Uh, so I think the first thing I would say is always remember that it's not necessarily that the board is dysfunctional. It's not even necessarily that the chair is dysfunctional or the CEO is dysfunctional. The... So I think we need to watch out for that sense of, this is a dysfunctional board, this is a dysfunctional chair, this is a dysfunctional relationship. Start from the place that the intentions here are good, so what is happening? And, and that brings a very different conversation, a very different ability to engage.

Then the second thing is to look at the system. What is happening within the system? Where is the fear within the system? And always remember that people will deny there's any fear because that's, that's not what we... That's not the primary thing we're thinking about. But when you ask that second question, "So if it's, if you're not, if there's no fear, what's getting in the way?" "Well, my-" Yeah "... concern is..." "Well, I'm just worried that..." "Well, I just thought that this wasn't being shared," and you'll start to understand what's happening.

Yeah.

And the third thing I would say is really going back to your question about the, you know, the board member who might observe something. While it can sometimes take courage to speak up, even at these very top levels in organisations Don't leave it until the dysfunction becomes the thing that people are noticing and talking about. Have the conversations earlier rather than later. Nip it in the bud, I guess. Yes. And it's such a good reminder that, A, things get fixed earlier if they're nipped in the bud, but also I think you mentioned it's people's responsibility as a director.

I love it. It is, yes. Yeah. At every level, it, it's a responsibility. Absolutely. Absolutely.

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

Uh, the, the main thing I would say is that, um, if there's anything that people would like to clarify around what I've said today, anything like that, I'm really happy for you to contact me and just heather, heather.campbell@commsmasters.com. I'm really happy for you, uh, if you want to clarify any points. Because I know that fear itself and power, these are two topics that aren't comfortable for people to discuss. But I live, I live and breathe them, so I'm always happy to, to clarify any points. Um, and, and of course, I'm active on LinkedIn if anybody wants to check me out, uh, on LinkedIn.

Oh, fantastic. Well, look, we will make sure there is a link to your LinkedIn. Super. Uh, and your email. Yeah. We'll make sure there is a link to those in the show notes so people can get in touch if they wish to talk more about all these fascinating things, power, fear, anger. Yeah. Those sorts of things. Yeah. The things that we don't like in the boardroom but do sometimes show up and need ... Just like, you know, you said in, in families they show up as well.

You know? Yeah. Families, boards- Yeah ... and so on are mostly functional, and sometimes dysfunctional. And it's- Yeah ... it's having the ability to work through the dysfunction, because avoiding it doesn't help. Yeah. You need to be able to work through it. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It has to be repaired. I've e- It has a real impact, not only at the top of the organisation, but through the organisation- Absolutely ... if it's not resolved. Yeah. Love it.

Oh, Heather, thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your wisdom with the Take on Board community today. I really appreciate it, and I know those in the community that are listening or watching will appreciate it too. So thank you so much for being here.

Thank you for having me. It's been a real pleasure. Thank you, Helga.

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's 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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