



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 306

Transcript – Advisory board mini series – Heather Disher dishes on business sector advisory boards

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Heather Disher about business sector advisory boards.

Helga Svendsen 0:07

Now you will know by now Take on Board listeners that this is part of the advisory board mini series, because this is episode four. So first up, we heard from Louise Brokeman about well, all things advisory boards. Then Sandra Gamble about energy and sustainability, Cynthia Payne on the health and aged care sector. And then, of course, we have the fabulous Heather Disher with us today to talk about the business sector. Next week, we're going to have Louise back again to close out the series as she talks to us about the state of the market 2025 report. So that's up next week.

Helga Svendsen 0:42

So before we get started, as always, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. 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 also pay my respects to 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 1:18

Now let me tell you about Heather. Heather is the chair of Pony Club Australia. You heard some of that story, oh gosh, not that long ago when we talked about sports boards. And she's a board member at Geelong Animal Welfare Society. She's also on a number of advisory boards, but we can't tell you their names, because they're confidential, but trust me, she knows all about it. Heather is a dual business owner, Alchemy Outsourcing and Disher Advisory Synergy, a director chair, non

Executive Director, advisor, certified chair from the Advisory Board Centre and a mentor with Rare Birds and Pony Club Australia's Leadership Program. Last year, I don't know how, because I don't know how she's got any spare time, last year, she co-authored a book called "She Built It". Heather has the unique combination of governance, advisory and business operations and strategy. When she's not working. I don't know when that is, but when she's not working, Heather's out on the nature trail running with her dog Koda. Heather. Welcome back to the Take on Board Podcast.

Heather Disher 2:20

Thank you very much. And I love that acknowledgement of country. I totally support that. And I was out this morning running on Kulin nation land, and it was just, it's magnificent. It just sings to my heart and my soul. So thank you very much. I love it.

Helga Svendsen 2:36

Great. Thank you. Yeah, there is something about putting your feet on the ground. I think of there is something about connection to country. And obviously, I am not a First Nations person. I don't have that connection to country at all in the way First Nations people do. But I think there is something just about putting your feet on the ground that does connect you in a in a spiritual way, basically, to the country.

Heather Disher 2:58

It takes that meaning being grounded to a whole other level.

Helga Svendsen 3:01

Yes, absolutely. So with that, I really want to get into the conversation about advisory boards and the business sector, but before we do that, as always, I just want to dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me, is there something from the last month or so that you're proud of that you can tell us about.

Heather Disher 3:20

From a governance perspective, I'm in my final term with Pony Club Australia, so I'm hitting my six years, and we've just completed and released a new strategic plan for the next couple of years, which is the most incredible. It's got animal welfare, there's connection to land, there's just these incredible things that we weren't even aware of six odd years ago. So it was incredible feat, and just amazing collaboration with our member states and members from all across Australia. So it was a

really wonderful experience to bring that together. And then on top of that, I'm in the middle of a chair succession, and it's going beautifully.

Heather Disher 4:06

Touch wood, touch wood, touch wood, touch wood, right? It's going beautifully. So we've got succession and contingencies, and it's all going really, really well. So care for the CEO, doing the changeover and the board and all the bits and pieces that go with it.

Heather Disher 4:23

So it's just an incredible relief to know that as you move into those final months, you're leaving a legacy where people can access it, it's not hidden somewhere. So really, really, really happy about being able to do that. And once I'm completely handed over and can sit in the space and let people run it, it just means I have more time for other things too, which is also very, very exciting.

Helga Svendsen 4:55

Heather and what I love most hearing in there is that you've got contingent. See, like I said, touch wood. Touch wood. I do remember years ago doing succession planning for a chair role. I think the first in line candidate, it was a Victorian organisation. I think the first in line candidate ended up moving to Sydney, like awesome job opportunity, yay, celebrate. But all of a sudden, not available.

Helga Svendsen 5:16

The second candidate ended up moving to regional Victoria to take on a massive, awesome role, so she couldn't take it on. And I think I can't remember now what happened with the third like we had a one, two and a three, all of whom couldn't take up the role for a range of reasons anyway. So contingency is excellent.

Heather Disher 5:33

Contingencies on the contingencies, and it's all written into the plan which it's working that's really well, and I'm really proud about it's going well. The other people involved, you, the deputy chair and the CEO, they're all feeling good, and that's really important to me.

Helga Svendsen 5:47

Brilliant. Yay. Big tick to you. Well, I can understand why you're feeling proud of that. That is absolutely something to be proud of. With that, let's turn to our topic for the day advisory boards. So this conversation is focusing on the business sector, and I guess, the role of advisory boards and what role they play, and anyway, tips, tricks, all of that stuff. Where should we start?

Heather Disher 6:16

I'm an advocate for SMEs in my businesses. I'm an SME advocate, because they create this amazing innovation. They deliver economic positivity in so many ways. So the small to medium enterprises in Australia and indeed beyond Australia, they have an incredible opportunity to access skills that they don't even know they need through an advisory board structure or an advisory board set up in business, we all have advisors.

Heather Disher 6:49

Governance boards have advisors. You've got your auditors, you've got your lawyers, we've got our committees. We've got advisors in a multitude of different ways, but having something set up for your business that either reports into your governance board or reports into your CEO if they don't have in a governance board, that type of structure gives you a massive competitive advantage, not only in your business, which is why I seem to work on and with a number of companies. And they're like, 'don't tell anyone that we're doing this' okay, I can just give you a couple of examples.

Heather Disher 7:25

So the real benefit for any business is that you can access skills that you don't need full time, you might need for a particular reason, but you want to be able to access that skill independently to who you are or what you need. So if you hired someone that's no longer independent, as in, hire them as a skill in your business, if you hired a consultant, they're delivering a certain piece of a puzzle, whereas an advisor is not doing that. They're looking at the problem. And quite often, this is where it gets so much fun and I love it. Quite often the problem is not the problem. There's a different kind of layer or problem, and we're finding this with governance boards a lot, which is why I'm a huge advocate that advisory boards support the governance boards, because the problem is not just a problem. There's multitudes of problems, and some of them are challenges and some of them are opportunities.

Heather Disher 8:18

So an advisory board can actually dig and uncover what's really going on and what the opportunities are.

Heather Disher 8:24

So an example of a smaller one was I was working with a family-run business, and it was on an advisory board of one. Now as a certified chair through the Advisory Board Centre, I'm an advocate of their principles and operating with structure and with purpose and having a system that you can use, that you can measure and that you can duplicate. So I love working within that system, which is why I love governance, because of the way that we work within our structure.

Heather Disher 8:53

So within advisory, I'm having a conversation with these incredible two brothers who were taken over from their dad in their security and technology business. And the idea was the brothers would take over from dad, and they would show dad how it's done. They've got great ideas. Dad's incredible. He's built this amazing business. But they've got the best ideas. And they're going to use AI, and they're going to do all of this stuff, and the business is just going to take off. The business did take off, but then it sort of stopped and hit a ceiling, and they're like, what's going on? So little bit of that duck action, where the duck sitting along nicely, and the legs are going a million miles an hour underneath, and they just weren't getting any traction. So when they brought me on, part of what they told me the problem was, was that they didn't know how to get to the next level. And what I uncovered was, is that they didn't need the next level. They didn't need to get bigger by growing that way. They could grow sideways or grow kind of wider and become a specialist in a particular area and then their problem was they're not the real problem, which is why it wasn't really fixing itself.

Heather Disher 10:06

They had to go through a whole kind of rethink about, why are they in business? What are they trying to do? They were trying to be bigger and better and more fabulous than what Dad had. And what they were doing was, in effect, becoming technically, more boutique and a little bit smaller, not as many people on the ground, but more profitable and a leader in a particular area of AI, particularly within school systems.

Heather Disher 10:33

So they went reimagining their problem and where they wanted to go in their business. So as their advisory board of one we uncovered that the problem wasn't really the problem. They thought it was. It was slightly different. And then we found solutions or options that they could move and go forward in that space. So they're still in sort of quietly navigating this space, because some very large players in that space. So this is part of the reason why I can't name them, because the big players will be like, right, let's go get them. So they're very quietly becoming a very good business in that space, and they're leveraging their skill, and they're moving straight into a niche that they will shut they'll just thrive in, because AI is not going anywhere.

Helga Svendsen 11:19

Yeah, right. So that's interesting as well, because we often think about advisory boards as, I don't know, a group of people coming together.

Heather Disher 11:28

An advisory board of one if you look at a group of people. I was having a conversation with a gentleman, and he said to me, I've got a problem with a family member. And I said to him, okay, well, this is an interesting conversation to tell. And it turns out that he is one of the heirs of a significant hotel chain, and the person at the head, that's running all the business, the uncle. And again, at the moment, they're going through some transition. So I have to remain anonymous, they had a problem in that the uncle, he's built this whole business from one hotel throughout Asia Pacific, one hotel, and it's expanded. And certain family members have shares, others work in the business, and he's kind of brought the family in. The turnover is significant. They're a very large organisation. He wants to start stepping down, but he doesn't like what the younger ones are wanting to do with the business.

Heather Disher 12:30

He believes that you stay the course, and you stay in the style of hotel and resort that we are, and we offer good service, and we do these things. The younger ones are saying, we want a boutique. And another one said, I want to run a luxury tour business, and we want to kind of expand into some of these places. So I was brought on board to have a conversation with uncle, to see it's very important as a certified chair, or as an independent person that you can kind of gel and match with the person, and you can have respectful conversations without you can have robust conversations, but like in a boardroom, it needs to be respectful, and people need to hear each other out.

Heather Disher 13:12

So uncle was happy, which was really nice, and I came on board to set up the understanding first of all, between the different parties, and there are a lot of parties in a family business, particularly in a board this age, the board was 20 members. It's 20 members on this governance board across multiple countries.

Heather Disher 13:35

So the advisory board will report to the governance board. So we set up a charter, very, very clear about what it is that the advisory board was going to do, what problem are we going to be looking at, or what solutions, what's the topic? Very clearly, charter, and then the reporting back, and then

there's the timing, who's going to be on the advisory board, the budget for it, because this is a significant undertaking.

Heather Disher 14:03

So we have eight people on that advisory board, seven members at the moment, and myself as chair. We have a psychologist, which is an interesting requirement. Somebody's psychology and behaviour just been very helpful. Let me tell you, we have an international tax and war specialist. We have two types of property people. One commercial leasing and development. Then we have a builder, so a property building, so the physical building and architectural kind of skill set. We also have a strategist, so somebody who is just focusing on strategy, and then we have technology, and the technology component has a very high level security attachment.

Heather Disher 14:50

So of these eight people, that's who we started with, and within that group, we looked at all of the different options available to this business. Do they stay the course? What does it look like in 10 years time? What does the world look like for this business? Do they go into a boutique, a boutique luxury tour operator? Do they go into small sort of boutique? What do they do? And we had a look at all of the different options, and provided all of the different information for each of those different options. They were the three key options. We brought those together back to the board, and it was just over 16 months, because it took about three months or so to get the right people together and then get us sort of going. So it's about a year. So we actually moved a lot quicker than normal. I'm not sure how we did it, but...

Helga Svendsen 15:40

Or having an effective chair Heather, that might have been part of it too.

Heather Disher 15:48

We did a real incredible job, and to get some information back, so uncle has a three-year plan to step down. They have sold one property and purchased a new boutique hotel that is currently bringing returns that are above forecast. So uncle's very happy they haven't, as yet, gone into the luxury tourism. And I don't know whether they're going to, but they're going down that path, and the board members from that particular board, we all step away because their job is done.

Heather Disher 16:21

So what's happened in over the Christmas period was that the board reached out to me and said they would like two other advisory boards, and they would like them to report into the governance boards. And what I think was most validating for me was that uncle was happy. But what was really important is that there's a group, there's about four people on the governance boards that did not support the advisory boards, and did it in any way offer any positivity, and they were the ones that reached out. That was really significant. So that kind of businesses, you know, they're turning over \$500 million. They're a significant business, but they had a small problem that was very big in terms of, where do they go and what is the direction their problem being? You know, what does their market, what does their company look like? And that can be any business, any size, that can be absolutely anyone. It doesn't matter whether you're a small security or technical and you're trying to grow your business, it doesn't matter whether you're a large hotel conglomerate. Makes no difference at all. The problems are the same. I just find the right problem and then getting the right people in the room to offer alternative thinking or a different approach to finding information.

Helga Svendsen 17:42

I love it and that that's our problem. That's our brief. Done. Let's move on. So this is what I was going to ask before, and I think it remains relevant. What's the difference between an advisory board or an advisory council, or whatever an advisory group an advisor and a consultant, because you could get a consultant, good new coming in that helps you?

Heather Disher 18:07

Oh, yes, you can hire a consultant to be on your advisory board. And we did. We hired a consultant. We hired a strategist who consulted in strategy. We hired the psychologist and behaviourist, was a consultant in effect? One of my genius moments was like, right, we need someone to manage the people and the communication.

Helga Svendsen 18:28

Oh, gold for a family business. Gold.

Heather Disher 18:32

You need consultants for your advisory board. You also need industry experts. You also need people that, not off the street because you don't know them, but people with lived experience. So there could be anybody from anywhere, depending on what it is that that advisory board needs.

Heather Disher 18:48

One of the differences between hiring an advisor and hiring a consultant depends on the type of advice you need. If you're hiring a bookkeeper, they can technically be a consultant, because their contractor and their advisory is not independent, because it's focused very much within their sphere, and they already work for your business.

Heather Disher 19:11

So when I talk about and when Louise and this whole series is talking about advisory boards, we're talking about a structured, benchmarked, principled product that we very carefully create and measure and manage to get the most out of the individuals on it.

Heather Disher 19:31

So you could hire a consultant, or you could hire an advisor, somebody like myself and these companies had the opportunity to do that. Part of the reason that they chose someone like myself, who is a certified chair and advisor is that am not coming in with a predetermined scope. So when you talk to a consultant, you say, here's my problem. These are the solutions I need or tell me what solutions you can provide, and they are actually providing you with a contract that says I'm aware of this, I will deliver X, Y and Z.

Heather Disher 20:05

When I come in, I'm going to say I'm aware of pretty much nothing, and I'm going to find out. I'm going to find out what this problem is, and my job is to uncover the problem and to create a solution for you or potential solutions for you.

Heather Disher 20:23

The other thing that's really important is that advisors and advisory boards do not make decisions. Their recommendation is information only. So it's scenario planning in many ways, and that's what we did for uncle and the board, is we scenario plan. This is what the company will look like if you go down this path. This path, this is what it'll look like in this path. These are the factors and considerations for each these are the things you may not have considered. This is a whole sort of other situation, if the world turns slightly and there's war in this particular country, this kind of what will happen? So consultants don't do that.

Heather Disher 20:58

There's a big difference in that. The other thing, and I think Louise would have, I'm sure she would have mentioned it many times, is independence, and it's a really important aspect of the world of best practice advisory that I operate in, and that Louise and my and my peers operating as well. And what that means is that we are not in any way connected to the company, other than through this role. We have no financial, physical, mental, there's no benefit to us in whatever decision or wherever they go. And there's power in that, because nothing rides on it, and there's no bias in our thinking or which way we go. That is not the same for a consultant. The consultant needs to make a stand and maybe put forward a solution, deliver a particular solution, so they have to stand for something, and that independence gets lost. But a consultant on an advisory board incredibly powerful.

Helga Svendsen 21:54

So Pony Club Australia, I understand there's been, what a surprise they are chair of the board there, although maybe this has been in place for a while, but tell me, what have you got in place there, and how's it been useful?

Heather Disher 22:06

It's funny, because I've been an advisor before. I was in governance. I just didn't know it, because it wasn't really around. And then I wanted to be work in the governance space and work on a board, because that's where the culture comes from. That's where strategy comes from. That's where the decisions are being made. So I wanted to be part of that.

Heather Disher 22:25

And then looking at my work over the last nearly six years with Pony Club Australia, which I love, the most incredible community, and one of the things that I've I've utilised with my strategy and my governance and my advisory and the things that, and this is why you have skills matrix for a board. But that's a whole other topic. You bring in somebody, and I was brought in for strategic and commercial thinking.

Heather Disher 22:49

So one of those things was advisory boards can be called committees. You can be called them a council, if you put somebody independent into them to operate them.

Heather Disher 23:01

So Pony Club Australia has two advisory boards. One of them is the Education and Development Committee that many years ago, I was part of the board that set that up and that created our leadership program, which is just an incredible program for young people. They don't have to actually be riding a horse, they just have to be part of the community. So an incredible program, and I'm a mentor in that program as well.

Heather Disher 23:30

But what happens is we're getting from the Education and Development Committee. They are giving us information about education and development activities and new fields of learning and different ways to think about because the board can't, we don't have this skillset on the board, so we've got this committee to tell us what's going on and to give us ideas and to create initiatives, and then we make our choices and decisions from there.

Heather Disher 23:59

We also have the Youth Advisory Committee or council, and they are there to be the voice of the youth. And again, this is the wonderful power of having an independent person operating the chair in those roles. They're not operated by the board. The board supports them and resources them, but we do not have a voice in that space, so any information that comes through to us is non biased, or it doesn't have any slant towards what we might or may not be needing. So the Youth Advisory Council just works so beautifully because they're the voice of the youth, and they bring through initiatives, and they're giving us, telling us what's sort of going on in that space. We've created many different programs that have come from ideas from them.

Heather Disher 24:43

I leveraged that while I was chair of Pony Club International Alliance, and we now have a PCIA Pony Club International Alliance Youth Council with two to three members from each country sit on that council, and the age group is 16 to sort of 21-22 and the most incredible things have been happening globally. And the most incredible information has been coming through to the board of the International Alliance about what's going on internationally with the teams in that space, and the amount of engagement that's coming.

Heather Disher 25:16

And again, no one from the board, we support it and resource it. No one from the board says that they appoint their own chair. It's just the most incredible thing. So if you've been thinking about that from a business, if you commercialised it, it's so powerful. So just leveraging some of these advisory

boards, I mean, large businesses and corporates have been using this for decades. They've been using advisory boards for decades, competitive intelligence, CI and BI business intelligence. They've been using the advisory boards in a number of ways for a very long time, and it's all been very quiet because it's competitive advantage.

Heather Disher 25:51

So anybody, no matter what business you're in, no matter what boards you're on, an advisory board could be an advisor of one, if they're independent and they're part of I'm an advocate for the Advisory Board Centre in the certified chair program, because that's where you get all of the processes and the benchmarking and all of the principles so that you know that you're getting the best practice outcomes. So yeah, I'm very proud of what we've been able to deliver in Pony Club Australia. Super, super proud.

Helga Svendsen 26:21

That's a neat segue. I think I knew you'd have loads of good stories, Heather, I just knew it, even if you can't tell me their names, I knew you'd have lots of good stories, all good. So from the stories you've told us, and indeed, from the wealth of experience that you have, what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation today about successfully integrating advisory boards?

Heather Disher 26:44

I could get technical, but I won't. To successfully integrate an advisory board, you need an independent chair and a really good charter. If you start with an independent chair and a really good charter, everything else falls into place.

Heather Disher 27:00

So if the charter, like governance boards use charter, it's exactly the same, it's very clearly, telling, you know, instructing, what is the purpose, what is the process, and what are the people in the charter? If you cover off that and you get a really good, independent, certified chair, they will set it all up and the charter will deliver. It will absolutely deliver.

Heather Disher 27:24

And the other thing I'd like to say, too, for companies that are exploring it at the moment is your advisory board doesn't stay static, just like with uncles. There was eight of us, and we've all all gone away. But there's two more we're going to build another one. Will we have the same people?

Maybe, maybe not, depending on what the charter dictates. So you can have people come and go as you need them, just like bringing in a consultant, you bring in the consultant you need at the time. That flexibility is very powerful.

Helga Svendsen 27:52

Oh yeah, I can totally see that. Oh, amazing, other than the advisory board centre, because we will absolutely link to that in the show notes. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Heather Disher 28:05

Oh sure. If you go to my website, Disher Advisory Synergy .com, you can sign up for my email. I don't spam. It's only out once a month, and I do case studies, and some of them in another year. I can tell you about the two businesses I've just mentioned, but I talk about different case studies, and I share some learnings, and we bring in some advice. So I happily sign up for their email, or otherwise reach out to me on LinkedIn. And if you'd like an introduction to somebody, or, you know, just, just reach out.

Helga Svendsen 28:40

Oh, I love it. Well, we'll put a link to your website as well as to your LinkedIn in the show notes as well. Thank you so much for coming and sharing your wisdom about business advisory boards. Thank you also, I'm pretty sure it was a conversation between you and I when we were talking Pony Club Australia that prompted this whole series. So thank you so much for prompting it, helping me plot and plan it out. It was just fantastic. Oh superstar. We'll get you back in 12 months time so you can tell us where uncle and his crew landed.

Heather Disher 29:13

We'll have to see how my next governance role, how that pans out.

Helga Svendsen 29:18

Well, that's true. We'll just do a regular check in beautiful thank you so much. Heather.

Heather Disher 29:23

Thanks, Helga, I love what you're doing with Take on Board is amazing. It's just amazing. Love to be part of this community. Thank you.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>