

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 197

Transcript – Helga shares insights on the ‘leader-to-leader conversations for board directors’ program



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, you're going to be hearing from me as I give you some information about a program I recently participated in, called leader to leader conversations for board directors. Before I start that conversation, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I record this podcast. today. I'm on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land to waters to culture, and that this land was never ceded.

As you may have heard me mentioned before I support the Uluru statement from the heart. And I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do so as well. So, leader to leader conversations for board directors is part of the Disability Leadership Program, which is run jointly by the Australian Network on Disability called AND, and the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the AICD. I'm sure you've heard me talk about the AICD before, but you may not have heard me talk about and so as a brief introduction, and the Australian Network on Disability helps organisations employ people with disability, and helps them to design their products and services for customers with a disability. So the aim of the Disability Leadership Program is twofold. Firstly, to increase the representation of people with disability on Australian boards, something I also wholeheartedly support. Secondly, to support the AICD to build disability confidence of their delivery team and accessibility of their courses. The program involves 100 scholarships being awarded per year over two years to people with a disability to do the company directors course, and facilitation of these leader to leader conversations, which is the part that I was involved in. Now, I know I've spoken about this before, but a few statistics that I'm borrowing from AND almost 20% of the population has a disability. One in three people have a disability or are close to someone who does. Most disability is non physical and non visible. And the prevalence of disability increases with age. At age 15, you've got a one in 12 likelihood of having a disability by age 45. It's one in six, by age 61 In three, and by age 75, one in two. So as I mentioned, I was involved in the leader to leader conversations for board directors. So this part of the program provides an opportunity to learn

through storytelling and connection. The program connects Australian directors, that's me with selected leaders with a disability who are already participating in the Disability Leadership Program.

So I was matched up with a leader with a disability, to have a discussion, simple as that to hear about experiences, challenges and opportunities, with an aim to increase the understanding of the barriers that people with a disability face across business and the community. So this program was two parts, I guess, well, probably three parts. But so there was a pre session, there was the session itself. And then there was a report. So let me take you through those three parts of the program. The pre session was 30 minutes online. And it just covered a little bit about a end and the Disability Leadership Program. It gave us a bit of an overview of disability in Australia, some of which I've just shared with you talked about the purpose of the leader to leader sessions, the session details and format, what our role was, and top tips for inclusive and accessible communication and participation. So I'll share some of that with you now because it's really useful for us in making our boardrooms more inclusive and indeed making our lives more inclusive and every part of it. So our role as the directors, I guess there was directors and people with a disability and our role as the directors was being a listener wasn't to tell the people with a disability. Let me share my great wisdom with you. It was to listen. So to be an active listener, spending time with a speaker in conversation to learn about their story and to ask questions. And following that way, the director listeners were asked to share our reflections and key learnings with the group. Our role secondly was to demonstrate inclusive and respectful behaviors. Thirdly, we needed to be willing to build a disability confidence. And fourthly, our role was to respect privacy and confidentiality, noting that the information shared in the session, particularly relating to the person's disability may not be shared with anyone else without permission. So, know that in this podcast, as I'm telling you about the program, I won't be telling you about the conversation in detail. for this exact reason, it was a private conversation for me to learn. I will talk to you about the lessons from that, but not about the information shared. And I thought the guiding principles that were shared with us were really useful. Three things: Firstly, never make assumptions. Secondly, always ask the person. And thirdly, a person's disability and their experience of disability is as unique as their fingerprint. So we can't make assumptions that one person who is blind will need the same requirements as the next person who is blind or one person who is on the autism spectrum may require the same as the next person, you always ask them, and the top tips that were provided for inclusive and accessible communication. Provide an audio description of yourself with introductions, and be prepared to share what you are comfortable sharing one person speaking at a time. Thirdly, state your name before speaking. And fourthly, be patient in allowing others to finish their sentences before responding. So when we did our round of introductions, we said exactly that, Hi, my name is Helga. I am wearing glasses, I've got brown, increasingly silver, curly hair. And I'm wearing a grey jumper, you know, introduced ourselves like that, with what I'm wearing right now. And whenever we spoke around the room, it's Helga, I just like to say, it just makes it much easier. And to be honest, a few years ago, in a board accelerator program, and indeed, continuing to today, I've often had people with visual impairment in that program. And in those sessions, although to be honest, I should do it in all of them. We encourage people to say their name before they speak. Now, whilst that was done to support the person who had a visual impairment, it helped everybody because at the start of the program, nobody knows who anybody is. So repeatedly saying your name before you speak is incredibly helpful to most people in the room. We also got some tips around inclusive language,

focus on the person, not the disability, use person first language, but the person before the disability. So we talk about people with a disability, not disabled people. Although interestingly, I did read an article recently that some people with a disability prefer disabled person than person with a disability, which I guess links back to the guiding principle always asked the person, what do you prefer? How should I be referring to you. But if in doubt, it's probably safer to say a person with a disability than disabled person. And your language should be neutral and free from jargon, which is easy enough for me because I don't work in the disability sector and therefore don't have a huge amount of jargon. Although, I guess I do have the jargon of being a director. And I know I've shared this on the podcast before. But one of the exercises we did at the Royal Women's Hospital where I'm on the board, as part of our disability action plan was to rewrite a whole bunch of our columns in plain English. Now that was done as part of the accessibility. But again, it was so helpful for everybody. And she wouldn't the world be a better place if everything was just written in plain English. So that was our pre session to give us all of that information and to have a q&a so we can just ask any stupid questions that we had. We then turned up to the session, which was 90 minutes. As I said, it was around storytelling and connection. There was an introductory format where we all introduced ourselves, I was then paired up with their disability scholar, we had a 30 minute conversation. And we then provided some feedback to the group about what we had heard. So as I mentioned before, I won't be talking about what was actually in that conversation. However, I would love to share some of the themes from that conversation in that session. So there were three things and then some calls to action. First thing was around sharing disability related information. It was highlighted that sharing information relating to a person's disability may be challenging, particularly when the disability may not be visible. This is a personal piece of information that requires trust to be built prior to sharing. The sharing of personal information about disability relies on developing a culture of psychological safety and trust in the boardroom. And so what was emphasized was that it might be more helpful and constructive to normalize, asking about workplace adjustments. So asking our new board directors, for example, or even board applicants, what adjustments might be required for you to fully participate in the board processes? That's something you can ask anybody and everybody. And indeed, my point is because I asked this question myself on my program enrollment, that you often get information and advice about what will help that person learn, even if they don't have a disability, or if they have a disability, and they just don't want to disclose. The second theme was around accessibility. And again, it builds on what I've just talked about, the emphasis should be on the organisation asking the question, would you benefit from any adjustments in order to participate in this meeting, rather than the onus being on the individual to request a change? This will build trust and reduce hesitancy in sharing disability related information.

It also helps to ensure that conversations about accessibility and adjustments are front and center. And ask about those adjustments just as you would around dietary requirements or anything else similar. Also, in terms of accessibility, it was noted that the unwritten cultural rules of boards can be difficult to navigate. This is further amplified if the board does not follow inclusive and accessible practices. Thirdly, around accessibility, creating accessible processes, practices and materials will benefit everyone, not just people with a disability. Ensure your Board Papers and communications are accessible by using Microsoft's Accessibility Checker plan the provision of information in an accessible format, and that helps to uphold a person's right to access employment opportunities on an equal basis as others which is required under the Disability Discrimination Act. Fourthly, around

accessibility change needs to come from the top and effective chair is key to ensuring that everyone has a voice, and that access and inclusion is built into board practices. The third theme was around representation. And there was four points there. Firstly, boards are seeking to increase their diversity, and engaging with people with a disability, who as I said before, are almost 20% of the population is an opportunity with mutual benefit. Creating an accessible environment is key to attracting this talent pipeline. Secondly, in relation to representation, challenges were acknowledged about the diversity within the disability sector and the absence of a singular voice. People with disability are often identified as a source of inspiration or pity. And this is not reflective of the whole spectrum of disability. Any support needed and requested will be unique, it will not support everyone. Thirdly, in relation to representation, it's important to include people who have lived experience and this might include carers of people with disability on boards. This is valuable to the board and the community. And I should add there that, in my view, it's not just inverted commas, people with a disability being represented on organisations that do work in the disability space. Every organisation whether it's the ANZ Bank, or the Australian Conservation Foundation, or any role in between and beyond, will have better conversations if they fully represent the community and the society that they serve. And we're 20% of people with a disability, we therefore might need to aim for 20% of people in the boardroom with a disability. Fourthly, in terms of representation, it's not the person with the disability, that's the barrier. It's the processes and practices that create barriers. So I think we've talked again, on this podcast previously about diversity and inclusion. Diversity is one part of it, opening our doors to people that fully represent the community or society that we serve. Inclusion is about their voices, and their participation being fully embraced, and having our processes and practices in a way that allows them to be fully embraced. So we need to go further than just diversity and ensure that we have inclusion. So the call to action for directors that were at the session. Firstly, create a culture of safety and trust on your board that will empower people to ask for the adjustments that they require. Secondly, ensure your board has inclusive and accessible processes to support the inclusion of people with disability. For all meetings, ensure that you ask about adjustments. It might be as simple as if you have an adjustment request for this meeting, please let me know via email or phone and create accessible documents and ensure they are distributed in a timely way to allow everyone to read them. Thirdly, actively encourage people with a disability to apply for board positions to ensure your accessing a talent pipeline representing 20% of the population. This program with the Australian Network on Disability and the Institute of company directors is training hundreds of people with a disability each year through the company directors course. This is an amazing pipeline of people for us to get involved in the boardrooms of Australia. So I just wanted to very briefly touch on the Disability Leadership Program. As I mentioned, 100 Full Face scholarships are funded by the Australian Government, for scholarship recipients to do the company directors course, and amazing pipeline. So access those people. And secondly, there's a disability conference for board and executive members. This is where people who are part of the scholarship program are matched up for a more ongoing conversation, the session I attended was a one off, this is a more ongoing eight month mentoring program, where you are matched up with a person with a disability that helps to build your disability confidence and tackle unconscious bias by mentoring a leader with a disability. So you can become a mentor applications are closed at the moment, but I'm sure if you get in touch with AND, or the Institute of company directors, you'd be able to put yourself on the list for this in the future. That leader to leader conversations that I was involved in, had some really constructive feedback from participants, which of course, I was one. And that will inform the development of future sessions and

some of the reflections included. I think there's scope to do more with what we discussed on the day, not just in a report, but in terms of feeding it directly into the AICD training programs. Secondly, I valued the lived experience of all the participants and developing an understanding from the directors current thinking and challenges they are facing in the boardroom, related to diversity and disability. And finally, what I love, the question for all of us is what can we do differently to move the dial on disability inclusion. So there you have it. Now, if I were asking myself the key things I want people to take away because that's what I asked people at the end of each podcast, I would say that these opportunities of being involved in the Institute of company directors and the Australian Network on Disability programs, is a great opportunity for just that, creating more accessible and inclusive boardrooms. And I would ask that we all heed the guiding principles of never making assumptions. Always asking the person and knowing that the person's disability and their experience of disability is as unique as their fingerprint. If I were hosting myself, as I am, I guess on this podcast, I'd ask a resource. And I would say check out the Australian network on disabilities website. There's a host of useful resources there or even better, sign up to be a mentor for the directing change mentoring program, and go into it expecting to learn more than you will teach. I'll make sure there's links for those in the show notes.

So now over to you, let me know directly or in the Facebook group, how you've learned more about disability, or how your boardroom has become more inclusive around disability. If you've got a good story to share, if you've been involved in any of these programs, either as a mentor or as a mentee, then we'll get in touch. You might have a great story that we can share with the Take on Board community and we'll just make some time to record an episode. That's it. Over to you go and build more accessible and diverse and inclusive boardrooms and let me know how you go.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>