



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 363

Transcript – Helga goes solo: Lessons from the Larapinta Trail

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. Hi, folks. Um, I am coming to you from Central Australia, from Northern Territory, having completed day 13 of a 14-day end-to-end Larapinta walk. Um, I confess, I can hardly even see what I'm recording here because, oh, the sun is shining. It is glorious. Behind me, for those that have done the Larapinta, I am looking at Richertha, which is Mount Sonder.

Um, and I'm not sure if you can see behind me the... Oh, yep, there we go, maybe, the red walls of Glen Helen. So we're camped down on the Finke River, which is just in front of us. Uh, I've had 13 absolutely glorious days. I've only walked 11 of those 13. I'll tell you a bit more about that as we go. Uh, and I thought I would just, yeah, as I did last time, give a few governance lessons from, uh, my time out here on the Larapinta.

Um, it's been 14 days. There's very little phone coverage. There's very little connection with the outside world. I haven't read a paper in two weeks. I haven't listened to a podcast. I haven't read a book. Uh, I've been in bed by 8:00 pretty much every night, and have been sleeping gloriously and up at the crack of dawn or before the crack of dawn to get out hiking on the trail, and I've probably hiked about 200 kilometres or give or take over the last couple of weeks.

For hikers in the Take on Board community, strong recommend. I have loved every part of it. All righty. Um, now let me turn to, because, you know, you are the Take on Board community, so let me turn to some of the governance lessons. Lesson number one. So on the first night here, we all slept in swags under the stars.

I'd never done that before. I'd always been in a tent. I'd never slept in a swag, and it was glorious. You would wake up in the night and the, the, the stars... Oh, there's no light to get in the way, and the stars were endless. And what that made me think was about strategy and board setting the strategy. We often talk about the helicopter view and getting up out of the weeds.

And I actually wonder if we want to go further and take the starry night view of what we are doing, the really big picture of what our organisations are doing and taking that big picture view. So yeah, the starry night is the first lesson, and taking, yeah, that big picture view for strategy might be beyond the helicopter view into the, um, the starry night view.

The second lesson is around organisations and boards having standard operating procedures, doing scenarios, doing risk playbacks, I guess. Like as in when something goes wrong, you want to know exactly what to do. Now, I was reminded of this because on day three, as we came into kind of what would've been lunchtime, we'd been walking all morning probably from about 6:00 AM, I can't quite recall.

One of our group members, um- Was a bit heat stressed, uh, and in fact turned out to be more than just heat stressed. She was heat exhausted. So we stopped, we had her under an umbrella, giving her lots of fluids. Uh, Brayden, who was our guide for the day, was just magnificent. Clearly... Well, I don't know, maybe he's just good at this stuff.

Maybe the other part of it is employ good staff. He's either just exceptionally good at this stuff or had done something like this before, or there's standard operating procedures, because what happened was he had an excellent talk with Carol about how she was feeling, um, and whether she wanted to go on and she did not, uh, which meant choppering her out or otherwise getting her out, because she wasn't able to walk out.

We'd walked in about 15K, and she was pretty heat stressed, heat exhausted. So she's a nurse, she'll have some technical term for it, I do not. Whatever. She was under stress. So, um, what was extraordinary was First up, Brayden sitting her down and dealing with just the immediate emergency of getting her in shade, getting her fluids up, and those sorts of things.

Secondly, what was extraordinary was him having a really great conversation with her about what she wanted to do, and at no time did he say, "I think you need to do this. I think you need to do that." It's just, "How are you? What do you want to do? Um, we can organize whatever you need." So he did, uh, and when she said she didn't want to go on, he made the emergency call.

At the same time, he's got seven other hikers around him, and he looked after us in the most incredible way. He put lunch on whilst we were waiting, found us a shady spot to sit and wait for what was a pretty significant period of time. Clearly made some calls back to the office, who also swung into action.

So we were there for probably two hours, is my guess, uh, until she was well enough to do a little bit of walking, and we walked down this hill again because where we were, there was no way a chopper would've been able to land. So we got down the hill where it could land. Um, they came and picked her up maybe two or three hours later, uh, as in two or three hours after she stopped.

A emergency crew from Trek Australia came in and met us. Um, so we then had three guides, which was fantastic. Walked us back, so we had to retrace our footsteps and walk

back to a place where they could drive in, where they had driven into. Drove us out, took us to camp. Um, by the time we got to camp, oh, God, I think it was 9:00 PM, which in hikers terms is like 2:00 AM.

They had dinner for us. They'd set up our tents as well as they could. There were permanent tents there, but, you know, helped us with our bags. Everything. It was just extraordinary. So Carol was safe in hospital. Um, she's okay, by the way. She's back with us now on day 13. She joined us again, I think, on day nine or 10.

Um, and yeah, so what struck me there, doing your scenarios, doing those things you do on the board days about, oh, what do we do when there's a privacy leak? What do we do when there's cyber criminals? What do we do when this happens? Having that practice or having excellent staff or having standard operations proced- procedures is just super important.

So, and, uh, thanks to Brayden. And Matt, one of the, uh, one of the members of the group who was a nurse. We have three nurses. Carol's one of them. But, uh, yeah, they did an amazing job, and Carol is fine and dandy, which was awesome. Third lesson, risk. So this will sound like a pretty bizarre example, but I'm going to give it anyway.

So I came on this hike. I'm an experienced hiker. I know what to do. I know what to bring. All good. I brought the wrong shoes, as in not the wrong shoes out of my cupboard, just shoes that I thought were right that were not right. So I had a pair of hiking boots. I had a pair of hiking shoes, and it was clear by day three or four they were not right for these conditions.

They were mashing my feet. I could barely walk downhill. Ugh, it was awful I was very fortunate that on, I don't know, day five, one of our other members lent me a pair of her shoes two sizes larger than what I normally wear. Oh, it was like wearing slippers. They were gorgeous. They were fantastic, and I managed to do some really hard walks in them.

Uh, then in the middle of this, um ... One of the guides was going back to Alice Springs to restock, so the- where risk comes into it was there was a really awesome walk happening that day, fortunately a walk I'd done previously, because I've done some of this walk before, some of the Larapinta before. But it's the 31-kilometer day.

It's the big day. You kind of psych yourself up for it. N- now that I had V's shoes, I thought I would be able to do it. I didn't think I'd be able to do it in my shoes, but in her shoes I thought I could. However, with somebody going into town, I did my risk assessment. What's the likelihood of V coming back and joining us?

because she'd also exited by this stage. More on that in a minute. Um, what's the probability of her wanting her shoes, uh, and what's the impact of that if she does? The impact would be I wouldn't be able to do any walking for the rest of the hike. So after my risk assessment, I jumped in the car and went to Alice Springs for the day, bought myself a new pair of shoes, and came back.

It meant I missed a day of hiking, which I was a bit bummed about. Um, but my risk assessment was right. I've got these new shoes two sizes bigger than I normally wear, and the last five days of walking have been absolutely glorious. So my governance lesson there is

do your risk assessment. Um, yes, I was bummed about missing out, but, you know, likelihood consequence made it a bit of a no-brainer.

So off to Alice Springs I went. The next two, or one of them, is definitely familiar. I definitely said this from the last time I was on the Larapinta. I probably said it from my Jat Bula hike as well. I've probably said it on other things. Being on a board is a team sport. Hiking is a team sport. We have eight people in our group.

We've got two guides. But it's not eight people just wandering out doing their stuff. We mostly, not entirely, walk together. We support each other. We motivate each other. We encourage each other when people are feeling a bit down. We lend each other shoes like V did and gave me her shoes. Um, we carry things for each other.

It's a team sport, and that is exactly what being on a board ... It is not the best individual. That is not what hiking is about. That is not what being on a board is about. Uh, it's who is the best team. So yeah, hiking is a team sport. Being on a board is a team sport And my final governance lesson is about celebrating the wins.

So being on a board, sometimes you just turn up to board meetings, and it's all very serious, and you do your stuff and wander off again and don't take the time to go, "Hooray, we did good." For the last 14 days, 13, 14 tomorrow, every day we've done something good. There's been some celebrating wins. There's been high fives.

There's been, "You did good." It's been a great opportunity to celebrate the small wins, and I think that's what we need to do when you're on a board as well. So, uh, yeah, celebrate the wins. For those regular listeners to the podcast, you will know that that was also one of my themes for this year is to celebrate the wins.

So that's my wrap. I have had a glorious time. I think I said at the start that I wondered how my brain would go having no input, uh, no input from the outside world. It's gone gloriously. Uh, I have had... Even when I've had internet coverage, I haven't read the paper. I haven't done anything. I haven't listened to any of the audiobooks that I brought with me.

I haven't... I've just been here. Ooh, a butterfly just went past. God, it's beautiful here. Um, so my final shout-out is to the team that I have here with me, to our two incredible guides, Braden and Luke, who have done everything from get people chop it out, to make sure we have the most extraordinary meals, to answered our questions with incr- just unbelievable patience, um, encouraged us, cajoled us, bullied us occasionally.

They've been incredible. And of course to my teammates. Uh, h- we have here with us, uh, Olivia, Simon, Matt, uh, Carol. V was unwell halfway through, so she's gone home unfortunately, but she was awesome while she was here. Uh, who have I forgotten? Scott, Roxy. I think I said Carol, but I'll say it again just in case I've forgotten.

Of course, my good self. So folks, being on a board is a team sport. Celebrate the wins. Do your risk assessments. Do your scenario planning. Take the big picture way up into the starry night. They are my lessons from the Larapinta 2026. And if you are a hiker, oh my God, this two-week trip has been just the most special, gorgeous, glorious time.

Strong recommend. All righty, folks. Um, I will be back next week with a normal episode of Take on Board, probably from cold, grey Melbourne, not up here in gorgeous, sunny Central Australia. Uh, thanks for being on the journey with me, and, um, we'll see you next week. Oh my goodness, hang on. Before I close out, folks, I did not acknowledge country at the start of this, and how could I not do that on this- Extraordinary land, so I'll do it at the end.

So I would like to acknowledge the Arrernte people, um, of Central Australia and, uh, pay my respects to their elders past and present, and to any First Nations people we may have who are listening today. I acknowledge their continuing n- connection 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.

It's been an enormous privilege to walk on Arrernte land here in Central Australia, to experience the waters, to experience the skies, to, um, have a First Nations woman come and ex- uh, talk to us actually about some bush medicines. Um, thank you for Arrernte people for having me on your lands. Thank you for sharing these lands with the hikers of the Larapinta and, um, thank you Take on Board community for being here with me.

Over and out, and, uh, we'll see you back in Melbourne next week. Thanks, folks. 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.

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

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