

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 216

Transcript – Julie Kun defines compassionate decision making and brings it to the boardroom



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Julie Kun about compassionate decision making in the boardroom.

And before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present, I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture. And as I know, I've said before, I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now, let me introduce Julie. Julie is the chair of Gender Equity Victoria. She was formerly on the boards of the Australian College of Community and Disability Practitioners. WIRE, the Women's Information Referral Exchange, the Community Services Health Industry Training Board and ANTaR committee of management. Julie's pronouns are she/ her, she's a strategic thinker who works collaboratively to translate a vision of social justice into action. A proud intersectional feminist who believes in constant learning and walking the talk, a member of boards and committees of management for over 20 years and the previous CEO of WIRE, she has recently branched out with her her own consultancy, to support strategic change and robust, compassionate decision making. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Julie.

Julie Kun 1:24

Thank you for having me.

Helga Svendsen 1:25

It is fabulous to have you. Julie, before we talk about compassionate decision making in the boardroom, as always, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me something that you're proud of from the last month or so?

Julie Kun 1:40

Well, thank you. First of all, I also want to acknowledge that I'm coming to you from the land of the Wurundjeri people and acknowledging that is never been ceded. And the sovereignty of the Wurundjeri people to this land, also voice my support for voice, truth and treaty.

So what am I proud of in the last month, I think one of the things that I am most proud of is that I've been juggling a number of projects. And I have been leaning into some really hard conversations in which I have had to look at the compassion of many different actors, before deciding what action to do. And that is in my work as being on boards. But it is also in my work as being a consultant. And I'm always proud of that, because it's something that needs to be very conscious. And I'm proud when I noticed it, and others as well.

Helga Svendsen 2:46

Or we might, we'll delve into it as we go into the conversation, I'd be interested to know when you notice it in others as well. So compassionate decision making in the boardroom, you know, we often think about boards making decisions. We don't always think about compassion in the boardroom. How have you seen that show up in your board experience? Or maybe given the thing about observing it in others? How have you observed it in others in the boardroom?

Julie Kun 3:14

Yeah, again, I'm going to take a little step backwards and say what compassion is, because there's a lot of often confusion around that. And compassion is confused with kindness and empathy. And acts of compassion can include kindness and empathy. But they're not the same things. So compassion comes from a Latin word, which means to suffer with. And it's recognising suffering and taking action. And that taking action is really important. That relieves suffering and harm. The definition of empathy is the ability to understand other people's feelings and share their experiences. But you don't necessarily have to act on it, you just have to acknowledge that there is suffering. And kindness is treating people as kin, family. So that's where the kin and kindness comes from. So it's the friendliness and generosity and consideration, but it doesn't necessarily have to be informed. So when I'm talking about compassionate decision making, I'm talking about informed decision making where you understand the suffering that someone else is experiencing, you're

wanting to change that. And you take action to do that. All that is required for compassionate thinking.

And where have I seen this turned up in the boardroom? I see this turn up. When board members think more broadly, they don't make reflexive decisions. They make decisions where they look at multiple locations, how is this going to impact the organisation? How is it going to impact our staff? How's it going to impact our CEO? How is it going to impact ourselves as board members? What impact will it have on climate? What impact will it have on the community, on our key stakeholders? And all those important locations are considered. And you're always looking at, how can I do the least amount of harm? Often people say that's a very negative way to look at the world that how can I do as little harm rather can I do good. To that, I would say that, when you are undoing harm, you are looking to do something in which enables people or things to thrive.

Helga Svendsen 5:52

Oh, my goodness, so much in there already. I love that definition around compassion. I confess, I had not thought about the differences between compassion, empathy and kindness. And that makes perfect sense. And it doesn't surprise me at all, that it's something of interest to you, Julie, knowing that you are an action taker, or well, and good understanding. But what are we going to do with that? And that concept around least amount of harm as well, it's the least worst decision sometimes. That's the challenging decisions that boards have to make. Sometimes it's not always easy.

Julie Kun 6:24

That is the case. But I think also, some decisions are made in boardrooms where we think, what can we do that supports staff? Or what can we do to support service delivery, and they haven't thought about the harm that it will do. So they haven't had that robust conversation. So I mean, I always think of the expression, 'the road to hell is paved by good intentions'. And we hear this in boardrooms, we tried to do the right thing by whoever. And it's blown up in our face. And then there can be lots of resentment there. But often, what you find is that there was an act of perceived kindness, but without the understanding of what that action was going to do, not only to the group that the kind act was intended for, but also it may be for others that you hadn't even considered that would be impacted by that decision.

Helga Svendsen 7:27

Yeah, exactly. So that broad thinking. So in as much detail as you're able to share, is there an example from your board experience where either the boardroom that you've been in, has done this well, or not? Well, and I know that sometimes these things can't be shared. So in as much detail as you can share?

Julie Kun 7:48

I've seen both. And a lot of the boards I'm on and a lot of the boards that I work with are not of our feminist boards. And I'm gonna write something that can be maybe controversial. But I think maybe for people that have been on in boards, like I have, not so much, but maybe saying it is, it's not so often said, I think sometimes there can be a concept of to be a feminist means that our acts of kindness to other women means that we can't ask hard questions, or we have to accept what has been said. And to not do so is not being supportive, and thus that is not being feminist. And I will put it out there as someone who considers themselves an intersectional feminist, that that is very much a white feminist way of looking at things. Because often what that means is, those that are coming into the boardroom are often people that already have power, power as board members power as CEO. And when we say we cannot challenge what they've said, because that's unkind. That's not been supportive. A lot of hurt can be caused by that. It could mean that we're not asking robust, strategic questions about where the organisation is heading. We're not asking who isn't been included in this decision when we talk about women or we talk about whatever the vision of the organisation is, who is it impacting? We don't have those robust conversations, because one of the things that the literature on compassion has shown is that acts of compassion are usually for most people are centered on those that were closest to. And so when we don't understand a cohort of people or things when they're not in our vision, we don't bring them to mind as quickly with our decisions. And it means that they can be forgotten. And that's when the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Someone says, Well, I intended this good. But then it came to my attention later on that it caused all this harm. But if you do the work beforehand, so what I've seen when it works well in a board, is that they've set up the systems where they can robustly and in a strength based way, critique each other. And know that it's not personal, but knowing this is the investigation that we need to understand to make the best possible decision.

Helga Svendsen 10:49

There's a couple of things come to mind. For me, one is a friend of the podcast Brene, Brown. And her I don't know, saying I guess around 'clear is kind'. And it's a different way of kindness there. But if you're not clear, then that's not actually being kind. And what I'm hearing there is that robustness is part of that clarity in need to be able to ask questions. And indeed, we know that the evidence around diverse groups of which boards or one, diverse groups make better decisions, and they make those better decisions, partly because different questions are asked when there are diverse people in the room.

Julie Kun 11:26

Yeah, I think that's right. And I was talking there about organisations that are feminists, but let's talk about boardrooms that aren't feminist, where too often, there is just no challenging of the power and assumptions that are in that space. And you're more likely to have a boardroom filled with white males, you might have one or two white women there, you may be have a bit of color difference,

there may be a bit of sexuality, diversity, but probably not that much. And, again, you're getting these decisions made from a very small corner of knowledge. And it causes harm.

Helga Svendsen 12:09

Okay, so compassionate decision making, that is one that really supports that robust decision making. By looking through a number of ways it looking through understanding a number of different perspectives or lenses on things.

Julie Kun 12:28

Most definitely it is. And when I am working with boards or organisation, I talk about locations of compassion. So there's different levels. So those we are closest to, and that includes ourselves. And people often get shocked when I say that's the first one. And I've heard practitioners that do a lot of work in compassion that are not from the Western world, say they're shocked by our shock, because that's the way that they're taught that if you don't look after yourself, how can you look after anyone else. And I think as too often what I've seen on boards is someone comes in, they see that a lot of work needs to be done, and they burn themselves out. And they have put family commitments to one side so they can get something done. And it hurts them. But they're also more likely to say I can't put up with this anymore and leave the board. So the board loses that expertise, the organisation loses that expertise. So it is not a compassionate response to burn someone out, or to get to a position of being burnt out. It's not compassionate to yourself. It's not compassionate to your colleagues. It's not compassionate to the organisation. So it is looking through that lens. So who are we closest to? It's ourselves, it's our family and friends. The next place location is inward facing organisational setting. So that is board members. It could be staff, it could be the staff that are closest to the board. And then it could be the staff that are furthest away from the board and you might need to consider them separately rather than seeing staff as a cohort. And you may need to look at staff through many different lenses through what oppressions are those staff experiencing and don't need to take that into account and I suggest you should and you can volunteers CEO and the organisation is as an entity and not seeing it through the lens of I want the best for the organisation. So whatever is good for me or I think is good by definition must be good for the organisation as an entity but seeing it as something separate from everything else. The third location is outward facing organisational setting. So that's customers and clients It's your funders, it's your stakeholders. And then the fourth setting is external to the organisation. So that's community, society, and world environment. And I think, especially as I switch on the news, and we hear that Chili has got temperatures of 50 degrees, Greece is on fire. Typhoons are in Korea, all out of time, as it was nearly 20 degrees last week, here in Melbourne, boards are now saying climate justice is something that we want to see strategically part of our organisation, even though we are not an environmental organisation. So this stuff is happening, that compassionate lens in the internal and external locations is happening.

Okay. I'm going to reflect back just to make sure I've got it right. So self, and then the organisation internally, organisation externally, and then the bigger world, the community, the world outside. Yeah?

Got it in one.

Helga Svendsen 16:08

Okay. So for boards to do this, is it individuals to do this? Or the board collectively? Like how can this be incorporated into board decision making, so it is compassionate?

Julie Kun 16:21

Well, that's one of the things that I do, but you don't necessarily need someone like me. But once you have those locations, it is about good, compassionate decision making happens when you have a framework, and you constantly repeat. So it is about having a framework coming up with here's some questions that we will constantly be asked, so who is going to gain? Who is going to lose? Where is the harm that could be caused in this decision? Who do we need to speak to the board might not necessarily know. So if you've got no one on the board, that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but you've got something which may impact that community don't make assumptions about where the harm and where the gain is, do that work. And the more you do it, the easier it gets, the more it becomes a reflex way of thinking, the easier it is to bring the locations of decision making, which often are in the background of your decision making and bringing to the fore.

Helga Svendsen 17:35

As you're talking this through, I'm wondering how compassionate decision making in the boardroom, whether it's connected, and if so how it's connected to psychological safety in the boardroom. And indeed, the emotional intelligence or emotional capital of those people that are in the boardroom.

Julie Kun 17:53

You know, having that compassionate framework is one that really lends into emotional intelligence. And the more you use it, the more built it. And I'll also say that no one comes into a boardroom as an empty vessel, they bring in emotional intelligence, already. The other thing about that psychological safety is that when you are in that space, where those that are out of sight or brought into mind, it can be really useful for people that are marginalized, who are wanting to come into boards, knowing that they're going to enter a board, where they're going to consciously think about how decisions impact people that are marginalized, so that it isn't just on them to say, what about me? Or what about people like me, that the whole board, using a compassionate framework has the

role of bringing all the aspects of how decision could impact a vast range of people, especially those that are more likely to be harmed, rather than leaving it up to the marginalized person to do it, which does not create psychological safety and pigeon holes. That person to be tokenized and to be seen to the go to person about this one thing, so not recognised for their financial skills not recognised for their governance skills, or a whole range of other things. They're just seen at through a very narrow frame. So making the whole board do that work, you know, picks it up for everyone.

Helga Svendsen 19:37

Oh, that makes so much sense because it's I mean board members, generally speaking, you're not there representing anything, whether it's if you're a person with a disability, you're not representing people with a disability on the boardroom or if you're a person of color or whatever it may be. You're there as a board member. So I like that everyone needs to understand and take If that responsibility.

Julie Kun 20:01

Yeah, and I think the other thing with compassion is you need to be compassionate to yourself. So the other thing when we're talking about building your compassionate muscle is knowing that you won't always get it right. And when you get it wrong, you don't berate yourself, you take the time to reflect on what happened, what was the impact of what happened? And what can you do to make it less likely that it will happen again. And that's one of the things when you work in the compassionate space, you'll get people not saying things such as, and never do it again, because that sets you up to either fail or pass. But what we do say is you need to do the rigorous work to make it far less likely that it will ever happen again. And if it does happen again, then you're onto work really quickly. And you're doing the work to make sure that it's, again, even less likely that it will happen again. So it's about this continual improvement. But knowing that we don't say that in a lackadaisical, your way, because you could be doing real harm as you're on you. So you don't want to have a slow journey to improvement. But when you do start really thinking about how do my decisions, impact others, you will find that there are things that that you were doing or that I'm doing that causes harm. During this podcast, we are using energy, we are taking the world's resources, but it is finding a way that we can live with that and constantly on an improve.

Helga Svendsen 21:43

Yes, we have been flying somewhere exotic to record, we've just done it via Zoom, or even driven somewhere exotic. Yeah. Interesting. Ah, Julie, my head is buzzing. So I'm going to revert to one of my possibly cop out questions, but also possibly just making sure we get the most of it. What should I have asked you about compassionate decision making that I haven't?

Julie Kun 22:07

Um, I suppose the question is, what can you do to develop a compassionate mindset? Do you want me to answer that question? Do we have time?

Helga Svendsen 22:16

You're interviewing. I would love it. Thank you.

Julie Kun 22:21

Well, Julie, what I would do is, first of all, the one that we've already mentioned, bring things that are out of sight into mind, and bring people better out of sight into mind. As a board, think about your workplace structures, your governance structures, and seek to understand how those structures and systems may be causing harm. And what you can do at a governance level, to remove that harm, and increase the thriving within all spaces of the organisation inwardly and outwardly. Put assumptions to one side that is about the learning, you need to understand in order to make the most effective decision. Always ask, what is the most compassionate thing I can do right now. Because you will not be able to enact world peace, I wish someone could. But that's not going to happen. So there is a part that says this is the best that I can do. And that's all right. And I'll look in the future to see how it can be extended. But our organisation cannot fix all the problems. But we can do our part. And we can lean into that. Ask what is in my power to do. There will be limitations around that. But there will also will be capacity to do something. Ask who is experiencing the most pain and suffering around this decision? Because it is those that are located closest to the suffering and pain that often have the solutions. And I know at the beginning we talked about the voice to Parliament, but this really fits in is compassionate, just ask the people that are experiencing the pain. And they have the solutions. And of course as you know, I've been traversing and learning more about the voice to Parliament, the thing you hear is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people saying we have been telling you for a long time you have not been listening through the structures or you have not brought us close to mind. So again, it is about seeking out those that are experiencing the most harm and bringing them close to mind and action and taking what they say seriously going beyond empathy into action and repeat. It is repeat it as often as possible and make it habit.

Helga Svendsen 24:47

Julie that is such a valuable kind of guide for people. Do you happen to have that in some sort of handy list that people can get ahold of?

Julie Kun 24:56

I do and I will give it to you. So when this podcast goes up. People can download it go.

Helga Svendsen 25:03

Great, we will put it in the show notes, folks. Oh, Julie, what a conversation, compassionate decision making in the boardroom? What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Julie Kun 25:16

The main points I would ask people to take away is that to be compassionate, you need to learn to understand, you need to feel either emotionally or intellectually that you want to move the dial and decrease suffering, distress and harm and create thriving, and you need to do. You don't need to create world peace, but you need to do what you can what is in your power.

Helga Svendsen 25:43

And is there a resource you would like to share with the take onboard community? In fact, maybe this is it, maybe a handy little download?

Julie Kun 25:51

That's right. That's what I think that's it.

Helga Svendsen 25:53

Excellent. I'll look, I think that'll be super valuable. It'll be super valuable for me, and I'm sure it will be super valuable for others. So we'll make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. And folks, if you're out walking or driving or whatever, and can't access the show notes right now know that it's all on the Take on Board website. So just go back to that whenever you get back to your computer. Julie, thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this thinking and to do this research and for sharing with us and with the Take on Board community today. I really appreciate it and I have no doubt that others will as well. Thank you.

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