

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 215



# Transcript – Karen Foster explains boardroom power plays - how to recognise them and how to use them

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Karen Foster about boardroom power plays.

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 to waters and to culture. I know I've said this before, but I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart. I'll be voting yes in the referendum that is coming up later this year. And I encourage others in the Take on Board community to take the hand and take the offer, the very generous offer from First Nations people in this country to support them in the referendum that's coming up.

Now, let me introduce Karen. Karen is on the boards of Western Primary Health Network and is the chair of the Let's Talk Foundation and the Mayor which in my head is basically the chair of the Moyne Shire Council. She's a busy woman. She's a former chair of Leadership, Great South Coast and Moyne Health Services, and a former board member of Brophy Family and Youth Services, Corangamite Regional Library Corporation, Regional Leadership Australia and GAICD Regional Advisory Group, Great South Coast. A former journalist Karen went to the inverted commas you can wait can't see me doing this but went to the dark side of PR and marketing in the late 2000s. She established a communications consultancy o2 Media in 2007. Karen also works for not for profit boards in strategic and business planning. And during COVID. She retrained as a life coach and has combined these skill sets to offer leadership coaching for women. Karen is a mum to two inspiring young adult children and lives in coastal Port Fairy with her lawyer husband Gary, two dogs and a handful of chicks. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Karen.

Karen Foster 1:57

Thank you. It's great to be here Helga.

Helga Svendsen 2:00

So, Karen, I'm really keen on exploring boardroom powerplays. But as always, before we go there, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me what was young Karen like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom?

Karen Foster 2:17

Interesting question. I think my earliest primary school teachers would probably tell you, I was a bit bossy. I think it was one of those little girls, I would like to say I was confident as the as a youngster. But as so often happens to women, somehow lost that confidence through my teens and probably always had a fascination and I was drawn to leadership in all its different guises. But lacking that confidence, I really didn't put myself forward until much later, in terms of being drawn to boards. My first board was actually a not for profit organisation that I had previously worked for. I was so interested in what they were doing. And so it was hard. It was really hard work. It was it was a family and community services organisation. And I didn't really want that experience to end. And even though I was no longer working there and my career had gone off in a divergent path, I still felt a strong loyalty to that organization. And they were looking for somebody, as so often happens in regional areas, shortage of of potential board directors, or people who are interested in being board directors. So the chair at the time spoke to me and said, Would you be interested and said, Yeah, hell yeah, I've got no idea what to do. Does that matter? They luckily, they did have enough confidence in me to give me a try. And I was pretty hooked from the get go really?

Helga Svendsen 3:47

Interesting. There's two things in there. I want to pick up on, you had the confidence to say, hell yeah. Even though you weren't quite sure what you were doing. You know. So confidence maybe shows up in different ways, even though we don't feel it. And the second thing is, it's interesting, you know, you're hooked from the start. So I'd love to hear your reflections about that confidence. And I'd love to hear what hooked you in what was it about?

Karen Foster 4:12

Excellent question. So in terms of the confidence question, I think the chair who approached me, Anna, who has since passed away, unfortunately, but I think the fact that she felt I could do it, I'm quite sure she would have asked if she hadn't felt that I had the requisite skills to do it. And I respected her so deeply that I think also part of me didn't want to let her down but because she came forward and said, I think you could do this. I thought well, but if you think I can then I will have a crack at that one. Yeah, and the second part of your question about being hooked from the start. I am definitely not a details person. So I had found that you could actually think in these big a huge concepts, and it was a good thing but Because previously, that had not been a good thing in my career, it was it was as a doer, you got to have that interest in detail, which I never really have. I love

big ideas. I'm not great on the delivery. I'm much better at engaging with the ideas and planning for them. And I think that's what really sparked my imagination and my fascination with boards.

Helga Svendsen 5:24

Oh, see, now I've got a third follow up, which kind of relates as well, but it's just occurred to me as you're responding to those questions. I went, Oh, my gosh, Helga. You're interviewing a journal. Gosh, you know, so little bit of impostor syndrome just lived on this side as well. That in thinking about it, journalism is all about asking good questions. And board directors are all about asking good questions. So I'm wondering what lessons you got from journalism as well, that helped you in the boardroom?

Karen Foster 5:56

Yes, that's a really great link. And it's true. Journalists are intrinsically nosy, I think. So they, they want to find out about people as much as things. And I think the fact that I'm interested in finding out about people has really put me in good stead as a director, and a member of a board team. But I'm also interested in finding out about stuff and how things work and and what's the plan? And how do we do this? So that absolutely is true. I hadn't actually drawn that parallel myself. So well done on that one. But I think, yeah, if you're a naturally curious person, that's a great attribute to have as a board director.

Helga Svendsen 6:37

I know a number of journalists who have ended up in the boardroom. And I think that asking questions, that's great.

Karen Foster 6:43

And you see a lot of journalists go into politics, I think for the same reason. Yes,

Helga Svendsen 6:47

Yes. Feel the independence in the ah... that got up in the last election definitely went through that as well. Okay, well look through I would love to get onto our topic for today, boardroom power plays, and how women can step into their authentic power. I'm wondering in as much detail as you might be able to share whether you can share with us your experience of any boardroom power plays, that might have happened while you've been in the boardroom and what you might have learned from that.

Karen Foster 7:16

Yes, so, so many, so many examples. I know we'll talk a little bit about gender in this discussion. So it probably comes with a big disclaimer, that not everybody, not all women respond in a certain way, not all men. And of course, it's not just about when men and women but so I am generalising, and I hope that everybody will understand that part of it.

But yes, power plays I have found have been very much associated with gender in my experience. And it seems to me that most of the boards I've been involved with, tend to attract older men. And that may be a reflection of where I live I live in regional Victoria. And you know, the kind of people who've got time to be directors tend to be retired. And it's often men because they're used to being in positions of authority and power. And into those boardrooms comes me who is obviously a woman, but also the kind of woman who people have described in the past as being too nice. Whatever that means nice girls always finish last, you'll never get anywhere because you're too nice people will eat you for breakfast. So coming from that background, it was always going to be some gender power plays because I had to navigate a world that was foreign to me as I hadn't as a journo, it's, you know, everyone's kind of in the mix, and pretty this pretty flat. It's there are obviously bosses and leaders, but we're all in there together, just doing our thing. And in the boardroom, I came across people who were quite used to being in charge. So it was an interesting dynamic. And what I quickly found was that I needed to navigate that to be able to form alliances, because you can't expect to sort of crush your way through or just talk your way through anything. You really can't fight your way through things. You've got to be able to form alliances with people you might not normally associate with or become friends with or connect with. So some of the early power plays I saw were people not hearing me or not asking for my opinion. And perhaps because I was new as well. I also encountered people and I've heard lots of women talk about this, actually not agreeing with my ideas. But then agreeing with the man next to me who actually had exactly the same idea a little bit later on. So I saw that happen a lot. And women being discounted, and I've seen it with other women as well being discounted, because they might be young or be because they might be a woman. And one specific example. And I will not use too many identifying features here. But a board chair that I used to work with was we were talking about succession. And one of the younger women had put her hand up to be chair. And his comment was, "she's just not ready". You know, it was sort of patting her on the head. You know, maybe in a few years time, what I saw was a strong, enthusiastic young woman with a lot of value. I think what he saw was something entirely different. And I couldn't quite understand. And he actually successfully talked her out of it, because she didn't have the confidence to, to sort of stand up to that. So and he couldn't give any justification as to why he thought she wasn't ready for it. There are just countless times there are times when male directors have asked if I would make a cup of tea for them. Which is appalling that that would happen in this century. But it really has. So this is why I'm so interested in this topic. I think, Helga, because it has been such a constant feature of my career directorship.

Helga Svendsen 11:18

One of the alleyways, I want to go down, you said that one of the ways that you have worked around these power plays is to build alliances. I'm wondering, how have you done that, again, in as much detail as you're able to share? If you aren't, can you tell us about a time when you have kind of seen this power play and you've built an alliance to maybe get a different outcome to the power play?

Karen Foster 11:40

Yeah, I think we tend to think sometimes we're above politics, in the boardroom. And it's kind of dirty. And I'm, you know, I've heard people say this, we're not a political board, we don't engage in politics, or human relationships are political, I think, whether we like it or not, we're political animals, if we're directors particularly. So you can't really afford to stand on high moral ground and say, look, I'm above all of this. So pretty early on just seeing some of the old boys network happening.

For example that happens a lot where, you know, it's men talk to one another differently, generally speaking, you know, they might talk about the footy, or they might talk about golf in a really relaxed way, and then turned to me and feel really suddenly feels very stilted, because I don't, like off, don't follow footy, I get that that's bizarre for a Victorian no matter what gender you are, but, you know, it's not my thing. So those alliances didn't come so readily, and so easily as they may have other people. So how I have navigated that is to really ask them questions and get to know them and find out about them. People feel apart from the fact that it's interesting to me to find out about them people do feel flattered when you give them your attention. And you've you ask them questions. Tell me what you've you're loving about this? And or what are you not enjoying about this particular issue? Or where do you see that going? And being prepared to hear the answers. So it's not just asking for the sake of looking like you're doing the right thing. So in the process of forming those alliances, I have been able to open my mind, because I've been hearing different perspectives that I may not have heard before, which have sometimes swayed my thinking to a certain direction. It's a win win in lots of ways getting to know people on that personal level, because it helps you to become a better listener and a better director. And also, there is that other more political element of if you prepared to support me on this, maybe I can support you on that other issue that I've been struggling with, but I see your point. So it's a bit of a quid pro quo, as they say, that's kind of the reality of getting things done. So you're just not constantly butting heads, there's a lot of compromise. It's a little bit like a marriage, isn't it? We have to be willing to compromise with the other party from time to time in the hope that they are willing to compromise for you sometimes.

Helga Svendsen 14:16

Absolutely. And sometimes, you know, having those, you know, again, inverted commas, robust conversations in the boardroom, where people disagree, that's valuable, oh, completely, so much more valuable than everybody walking in and just agreeing with each other. Because then you're not

really pulling apart issues and testing them and so on. So it's a really valuable thing, as long as, as you're saying you can work through and get to some sort of outcome as well.

Karen Foster 14:42

That's right, because then you don't want to end up with a stalemate where nobody, you can't move forward. But I think some of the best outcomes have been when there has been divergent views because you're forced to look at things from different angles and see things you may not have otherwise seen.

Helga Svendsen 14:59

You've been the chair of a number of organisations. And you're now the mayor of Moyne, which as I say, in my head is basically the chair of Moyne. I'm wondering in that role as the chair of the board, the chair of the Council, I'm guessing you observe power plays, sometimes from the chair's role, and the role of the chair is slightly different to, you know, colleague to colleague, what's your approach, when you're observing powerplays from the chair's, the chair position,

Karen Foster 15:30

You are so right. And I think I've noticed it absolutely, far more keenly from the chair than I did in the seat of a director because, as you know, the chair's job primarily is traffic direction. So you really attuned to watching people and watching their body language, and what's not said in the room as much as what is said. So I have really been able to observe that. And what I've loved about the privilege of being chair because it isn't privilege is that I get to intervene in a sense. So if I see that a director is being spoken over or ignored, that's my cue to then invite that particular director to speak and to make sure that they are heard. So I feel really privileged to be a chair for that reason, because I get to, I guess, intervene in some of those power plays and level the score a little bit make it a bit more of an even playing field.

Helga Svendsen 16:29

I was gonna say, I'm guessing I'm wondering, I'm guessing or I'm wondering, when you do intervene to level the playing field, do you ever get any pushback as the chair?

Karen Foster 16:38

Oh, frequently. Absolutely. And that's, that's fine, too. That's part of it. There will be directors who think, you know, they have a right to assert themselves because of some kind of superiority that they perceive, whether it's through experience, or whatever it might be. So you will often get people

who attempt to assert themselves but not only over each other, but over the chair sometimes. So that's even been interesting as a female in the chair role to consider that because those gender powerplays moves don't stop when you're the chair, they really don't. As I said, I'm really hyper vigilant because I have experienced so much of it. So. And I speak about it openly as well with my fellow colleagues, to try and make it part of our culture that we're at least aware of it. So I can't change anybody else. And it's not my business to try and change anybody else. But I can perhaps help them to be aware of the consequences of what they say and do.

Helga Svendsen 17:42

Your're role modeling a different form of leadership, both in the boardroom, generally, and from the position of chair. It's so interesting that I hear you know, at school, you were inverted commas too bossy later on too nice. And now it sounds like you're walking the line beautifully in terms of assertiveness and compassion in that role.

Karen Foster 18:06

Thank you Helga. I think women are often told they're too much of something. And there probably are lots of women who can relate to this. You're too nice, too bossy, too, out there too loud, whatever it might be. And I don't see those same things being leveled at a lot of men. But I think what I have learned, and it's one of the beautiful things about getting older, so it's, I'm now in my mid 50s. And it's a really nice time because I actually don't care what people think. And I used to, I really used to, but now I get to be me, if there was one thing I could say to younger me it would be stop worrying what people think, just be who you are. And be that and own that fully. And that's accusation that I had for so long, you're just too nice. And you'll never get anywhere. I now use that. That's my brand, essentially, it's kindness is a really important value to me. And I absolutely love that I'm kind and I don't want to be anything other than that. So now I use that to my advantage where I can as a leader to try and model that more empathic leadership style that happily the world is now embracing in a way it didn't when I was growing up in the 80s. It's about being true to who you are, and using that as your strengths. And owning that is your strength and not trying to be anything other than who you are.

Helga Svendsen 19:37

Interesting. You're the Mayor of Moyne. You know, you're the chair of the board in Moyne, how does kindness show up for you and the council in that council chamber?

Karen Foster 19:48

In listening in being considerate of not only the views of my fellow councillors in this case, but also the views of the ratepayers and residents there are a lot have different views. And it's about hearing

them and being willing to try and get the best possible outcome for them. So I think that is primarily for me. And also, in terms of the relationship I have with my fellow council is, we're all very different, I feel quite different to most of them. And, again, that's fine, I appreciate and value them for who they are. And I don't wish that they would be anything else. Or maybe sometimes I do in the back of my mind. But generally speaking, I just respect who they are, and what they bring, every one of them brings something different. It's nice to try and in a way, hear all of their views and genuinely listen to them, because they often change my mind. And that's not because I see myself as weak. It's just because I've heard them and have wanted to get the best possible outcome for our community. And I don't always know what that is what is best. So it's hearing what other people think.

Helga Svendsen 21:02

It is. So often the case, you know, all of those counselors, presumably are there because they want the best outcome for the community. Sure, yeah. You know, people don't give up their time and effort and so on to be counselors. Well, they don't always do it. For others, they do sometimes do it for other reasons. But back to the power place, sometimes it is.

Karen Foster 21:22

For some it is, yeah.

Helga Svendsen 21:24

But mostly it is about wanting to get the best for the community. And sometimes people look at that from different angles. And I think if you've got a group that is led in a way where you can respectfully talk through those differences, robustly, and respectfully, you will get better outcomes for everybody in the end, as long as everybody moves.

Karen Foster 21:46

That's right. And part of that equation is trust. I've always been the kind of person who trusts a person until they give me reason about to not trust them, instead of starting from a position of no trust and insisting that you know, you've got to earn my trust, I'm quite the opposite. And there is a vulnerability about that. But it helps you to build understanding much more quickly, it builds mutual respect much more quickly. And you don't have that suspicion and cynicism that can sometimes come when there is no trust. So that's been an important thing for me also.



Helga Svendsen 22:26

Trust and kindness. In the boardroom. It sounds like the sort of board, many of us want to be part of it.

Karen Foster 22:32

Absolutely. And there should be more trust and kindness in the world. And it's sad that it's perceived, those sorts of things are often perceived as weakness, because they're an absolute strength in my book. And just because you are kind or trusting certainly doesn't mean that you can be walked all over. Because then of course, you get emotional intelligence coming into play, which helps is a great armor in a sense, because you if you're an emotionally intelligent person, you can generally read other people pretty well. So and that's why I think why I'm such a huge supporter of women, on boards, I think we bring a lot of that, that trust and that empathy and high EQ to the mix.

Helga Svendsen 23:18

Absolutely. And I think boardrooms that have a high IQ are the ones that can have those respectful, robust conversations, that hear all voices and come to those best decisions at the end, that aren't always the decision that any individual director walked into the room with. But it's one that comes from that, pulling apart and putting back together of an issue or a problem or a challenge and coming up with the best answer.

Karen Foster 23:46

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And that's, that's something that is best done in as a team.

Helga Svendsen 23:52

Karen, these conversations go way too quickly. We've touched on all sorts of different angles and ways of looking at boardroom power plays, and some excellent advice about how to deal with him. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Karen Foster 24:10

I think it's... be you be authentic, be who you are, unapologetically, and lean into who you naturally are. And perhaps even a step before that is to get to know yourself. That's a prerequisite, I think, for any leader is to have that time of self reflection. And that doesn't stop. By the way, I think that continues, because we've evolved and changed all the time. But really take the time to get to know who you are, what drives you, what motivates you, what your character is your core strengths, and

then use those lean into them wholeheartedly and fully. Knowing that you'll never be the full picture. You'll always only ever be part of the picture in a boardroom. And that's the beauty because all of those other people around you to colleagues together, you're making the bigger picture too.  
other

Helga Svendsen 25:01

Fabulous advice. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Karen Foster 25:07

One of the books that an early mentor of mine gave me Ruth McGowan, who is very well known to anyone in local government and, and boards around Victoria.

Helga Svendsen 25:19

And a former guest on the Take on Board podcast. She is fabulous.

Karen Foster 25:24

Perfect. So Ruth, Ruth has been a great mentor to me. And she sent me the book by Alicia McKay called "You Don't Need an MBA", and great sort of messages around the fact that we all have innate qualities, and we all have life experience, and we all have intelligence to bring, we may not all have the MBA or the or the qualification, doesn't mean we're not ready. And if I sort of loop back to where we began with my first board, when I definitely didn't feel that I was ready. I didn't have the MBA didn't have the governance training, didn't even know what governance was, to be honest. I've learned since but I still had some value to deliver. And I developed other skills along the way. So I think that's a great resource for any aspirant, any leadership aspirant, but especially anyone who is interested in directorship.

Helga Svendsen 26:18

Oh, that is fantastic. We'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes. Ah, Karen, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and insights with the Take on Board community today. I know people listening will take a lot from it and learn from it. So thank you so much for being with us here today.

Karen Foster 26:35

Thank you, Haley. It was my absolute pleasure and honour. Thank you

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