

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 210



Transcript – Karen Mundine outlines why reconciliation matters to businesses and boards

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Karen Mundine about why reconciliation matters to business and to boards. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me, I am on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connections to land orders and culture. And I've said this before, but 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 Karen.

Karen is from the Bundjalung Nation of northern NSW. She is a board member of Gondwana Choirs, Sydney Festival, the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC), and Australians for Constitutional Recognition. She's a member of Chief Executive Women. As the CEO at Reconciliation Australia, Karen brings to the role more than 25 years experience leading community engagement, public advocacy, communications and social marketing campaigns and architect of the landmark Australian reconciliation barometer.

Karen works with governments business and civil society to advocate for change, and she's currently a member of the Australian Government's Referendum Engagement group. Over the course of her career, she has been instrumental in some of Australia's watershed national events, including the apology to Stolen Generations, Centenary of Federation Commemorations Corroboree 2000 and the 1997 and 2021 Australian Reconciliation Conventions. Karen holds a Bachelor of Arts and Communications from the University of Technology in Sydney, and was the winner of the 2021 Indigenous Australia UTS Alumni Award. In 2023, she was declared the national winner of the Australian Awards for Excellence in Women's Leadership. Karen, it's an honor to have you on the Take on Board podcast today. Welcome.

Karen Mundine 1:58

It's great to be with you.

Helga Svendsen 2:00

So Karen, before we dig into why reconciliation is important for business and for the boardroom. As always, I just like to dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me where were your parents born and where are your ancestors from?

Karen Mundine 2:17

Well, as you said in your intro, I'm from the Bundjalung Nation of northern NSW. So our home community is Baryulgil which is about 80 kms northwest of Grafton up in the amazing ranges up there. I was actually born on Cammeraygal country, North Sydney and my family's been living on Daruk and Gadigal country for well since the 60s when they move down from home. So yeah, I'm in New South Wales girl through and through, and really excited and really happy to be working on Gadigal Country these days. But, you know, I spent a lot of time down there on Wirundjeri Country, and I spent a lot of my misspent a lot of my teenage years down in country. So, yeah, been a bit around all over the place.

Helga Svendsen 3:06

Ah, excellent. Well, that answers my next question, which was around where you were born and where you grew up. So you, you were born and grew up in...

Karen Mundine 3:13

I was born on Cammeraygal Country, but they grew up sort of around Daruk in Western Sydney Country.

Helga Svendsen 3:20

And what about family? Do you have siblings? Tell us about the family unit.

Karen Mundine 3:25

I was an only child, or am an only child. But my mum came from a very large family of 11. And so I had lots of cousins. And again, sort of in that Aboriginal family way, cousins are like brothers and sisters. So growing up, we're all pretty close, close in age and yeah, I know a lot of people always sort

of mock me about, you are an only child, you're probably spoiled. But yeah, unfortunately, I didn't get to do a lot of things that 'only' children get to do because unless my cousins were involved, it didn't happen. And there were many of them.

Helga Svendsen 3:59

Oh, that is the worst of everything. You kind of get treated by outsiders as an only child but not by insiders as an only child that is missing out on everything. Now I'm interested, how many languages do you speak?

Karen Mundine 4:14

I speak one language, well, English. And then I have that horrible smattering of high school, French and Italian and a little bit of Spanish that sort of got me backpacking through Europe for a year or two in my 20s.

Helga Svendsen 4:29

Having just come back from Italy, and a little bit of time in Spain, actually, I don't know about you, but I know a little bit of Italian and a little bit of Spanish and they all just merge into one. When because, you know if I, if I can't, in fact, I can't even define sometimes between what the Italian word is and the Spanish word. It all just kind of merges into one foreign language, rather than... which is terrible.

Karen Mundine 4:51

It's terrible. I think what got me through was being able to say hello, thank you, pointing at things and saying how much, seemed to get me through most and with a winning smile, I think is also important.

Helga Svendsen 5:05

I was just gonna say exactly that, a smile is universal language I think it gets you through a lot. Yeah. And finally, in this background section, tell me, where do you feel your place, or your home is?

Karen Mundine 5:20

Well, home for me is and will always be Baryulgil. I was recently up there for some Sorry business, unfortunately. But that moment of you sort of, in my mind, you come around this bend, and I know

I'm home. And there is something really strong and powerful about that. And I think no matter where I live in the world, that will always be home, it's where my ancestors are, it's where my family who have passed are, and it will be where I end up, when I pass as well. So it's a really strong connection, I don't get back there anywhere near as much as I would like or should. But that's definitely home. But you know, in a more western context, you know, Sydney, where I am, on Gadigal Country is where I'd like to think I spend the most of my time at the moment.

Helga Svendsen 6:12

Your heart is in a number of homes by the sounds of things. It is lovely, thank you. Thank you for sharing a bit about who you are before we have the conversation today.

So you're the CEO of Reconciliation Australia and reconciliation has been on the minds I think, are well, hopefully on the minds of many in business and in the boardroom. Why is reconciliation important to businesses? Why is it important to the boardroom?

Karen Mundine 6:41

So we have a saying at Reconciliation Australia that 'reconciliation is everyone's business.' And I guess what we mean by that is anyone who lives in Australia or conducts business on Australia, these are, as you said, in your introduction, the unseeded lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and so to not have any knowledge or connection with us as a people and what that means to conduct business in Australia is a big gap, I think. We are stakeholders, we are employees, we are customer bases and so it really I think, is incumbent on businesses to be thinking about, well, what is that relationship that we have. It's also a very big conversation that we're having at a national level within Australia, and businesses along with civil society and educational institutions have a way of shaping how we think about who we are as Australians, but they also can impact about the policies that will influence what we do as Australians. And every business would say that they have some role to play in that social context. All businesses will have much to say around climate change and how that affects business, how it affects our triple bottom line. Likewise, particularly when it comes to land, when it comes to relationships with First Nations peoples and native title, this has an impact on business and how business is able to proceed, additional things that businesses may need to do. So again, these are all things that boardrooms and board members should be thinking about. What is the relationship that our business has with First Nations peoples at all these different levels?

Helga Svendsen 8:24

And I mean, you touched on some of the businesses. I mean, I think it's more obvious for some, mining industries, and so on that work with the land, but it's not just those industries, where it's important. It's for every organisation, whatever they might be doing.

Karen Mundine 8:42

Oh, absolutely. I mean, all organisations will have a physical location in some way, shape, or form, which may be on First Nations land. But again, as I said, there's a growing youth population of First Nations people, who are very engaged in social media, we are customers, we are stakeholders, and businesses will have a say, or will have things to add. And what we know, like, if we look at what are the AICD have done when we look at diversity and inclusion more broadly, we know that businesses that are more diverse, that they are twice as likely to meet or exceed expectations, that they're three times as likely to be high performing, six times more likely to be innovative and agile, and eight times more likely to achieve better business outcomes. So all of these things about how do you get that edge? How do you expand your thinking by including others at that table? And in this country, in Australia, that has to start with including First Nations.

Helga Svendsen 9:46

What's the role of Reconciliation Australia, the organisation you lead, tell us a little about the role of that organisation and how that can help businesses in that reconciliation journey.

Karen Mundine 9:56

Yeah, so our broader role at Reconciliation Australia is to build better relationships between First Nations Australians and other Australians. And it really starts with, what do we know of each other? And what are the things that needs to change to it to make those improvements? And that's, I guess why we came up with the Reconciliation Action Plan or RAPS program. It's essentially a business plan of how organisations so whether it's business, whether it's education, whether it's civil society, how an organisation can think about what's their sphere of influence? And what are the things that they can consider ,change, influence, that will create better relationships and better understanding of who First Nations peoples are? And again, what's that connection point? So what's the relationship? How do you create those respectful relationships? And in doing so, what are the opportunities that come out of that? And it's not a one way thing, it's not just about opportunities for First Nations peoples? It's also what's, what's the business get out of this. So what are the opportunities in terms of, particularly in regional and remote areas, it's about workforce issues where majority of First Nations peoples are living, and in some cases, are the majority of the population in particular towns and regions. It's about new customer bases, you have an increasing First Nations business sector, who, again, who are growing, who are doing things in different parts of the country, but also doing things differently and intuitively. And that's another way that businesses can help and support First Nations people to close the gap. And if we close the gap, and that means there is an increase in our GDP, it means we're spending less on having to create better and healthy education outcomes for First Nations peoples, which means that money gets invested in other parts of Australia. So, you know, these are all circular things of how do we make our country better?

Helga Svendsen 11:54

I'm wondering, you know, we talk about governance a lot, unsurprisingly, here on the Take on Board podcast and I'm wondering, we had a conversation at one of the breakfasts some time ago about Indigenous governance, and what boards can learn from Indigenous governance. Can you talk to me about what is Indigenous governance? And what can boardrooms learn from the First Nations people of this country around governance and had governance might be able to be done differently?

Karen Mundine 12:26

So I guess, when it comes to what we refer to as Indigenous governance, it's really just how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been governing themselves in their societies for millennia in this country. And we run a program called the Indigenous Governance Program and it's kind of I guess, looking at what is it that is different about these styles of governance? And how does it differ, I guess, from Western models. Now, not surprising, because of colonisation, because of the last 250 odd years, some of those governance models have been broken. But what we learned from those that still exist, and what we've learned from other parts of the world, when we look at Indigenous models there, the biggest differences, I guess, are around a more dispersed and consultative form of governance. So rather than a more traditional pyramid style, which sort of tends to play out in western governance, decision making tends to be more consensus building, it tends to have dispersed decision making and power structures so it doesn't reside and resolve just in a single board. There might be multiple bodies, that all play a role and have parts to say and influence and it's taking in all of those different perspectives, that then kind of creates final decisions. And I guess it's also our findings, that first nations people often put the community at the centre of the thinking. So again, making decisions not necessarily just about the individual, but what is good for the community as a whole. So again, that collectiveness. Everything else is the same when it comes to us. And you know, it's still about decision making, it's still about having clear lines of responsibility and who that you're speaking on behalf of, and for. It's about all of those making responsible decisions and being you know, financially and fiscally responsible and all of those things. It's just I think, sometimes the starting places, and the mechanisms of doing that are slightly different. And sometimes that means decisions can take longer. So it's not just a boardroom. It's not a bunch of 10 or so people sitting around a boardroom and at the end of the two hours coming out with the five decisions, there is lots of consultation, there is lots of engagement and it is considering that holistically as well. And, you know, again, what we found with our Indigenous Governance Program, and we run an awards program as part of that, is that and we've had some you know, quite senior people from the VCA and other kind of corporate entities who have been judges. And they've continued to be amazed at how well these fit-for-purpose structures work, and have sort of made comments that perhaps there's some things that Western governance could also learn through this process. It is that sort of, your prime purpose is not about making money, your prime purpose is about the survival of the community, and what is best for the community.

Helga Svendsen 15:28

Interesting. Have you seen it from your board experience? Where that melding, I guess, works well, those principles of indigenous governance around communication and engagement in the community, get melded well with I don't know, I guess what's perceived as a bit more of the hard nosed business end of Western governance. I'm not sure it is quite that simple that it's, you know, community and consultation versus hard-nosed business, I'm not sure that they are actually disparate ends. But I'm wondering, you know, whether from your board experience or from other organisations that you've heard about through the Indigenous Governance Program, hear of organisations that have done that melding well, and what that looks like?

Karen Mundine 16:08

Yes, I think about the winners of last year's Indigenous Governance was Wungening. So there are a drug and alcohol service in East Perth and again, so Wungening means healthy way in the Noongar language of the Perth region. And, again, it's how do they centre it around individuals are not just individuals who are coming in for treatment, but actually, it's about the family, because they know that the individual is not going to get better without support from the family. So how do we support the family and again, that's their starting point. So using cultures as that strength point, and then all of their business decisions, and they've been quite successful, come off that and that includes when government have come to them because they have been so successful and wanting them to take on other services, wanting them to take on other health services, wanting them to take on housing, and all of these other things, which are all kind of connected to their core business in terms of drug and alcohol recovery. But it also takes them away from their core business. So the way that they make those decisions is how does that again, when it comes to either housing or other shelters? How does that support the communities and families that they are trying to support? So, you know, sometimes the decisions may not actually be different in terms of the final outcome. But again, it's the thinking process of how you get there. And I guess the the vision and the why. The why that you were doing it. And I think that often makes these slightly nuanced differences of how you approach something because your why might be different. So the why could be, well, let's take on money services, because we've got extra money, and then that will help us grow and be bigger. Whereas their why is this actually helped support families that will then support the individuals that are coming into our service, and so therefore won't be repeat customers. So the why becomes a little bit different, and then they're still expanding, but how they do it becomes different.

Helga Svendsen 18:15

It's that staying firm to purpose and the broader purpose. I love it.

Karen Mundine 18:19

And you know, I find it really interesting, having gone to a lot of governance board and sort of business, forums and seminars lately. And this whole coming back to purpose and being really clear

about your purpose is kind of this driving force of how do we do business better? So again, it's a circular, or we've been doing it as First Nations People for millennia, nothing has changed for us.

Helga Svendsen 18:45

And I think having done it for millennia, boards are often around I think, the long term stewardship of an organisation. If anyone knows long term stewardship, it's First Nations people. Brains are already buzzing their edits, I'd love to, well, we'll pick this up again off here. But I'd love to potentially speak to some of the organisations that have been either winning awards or in the run for these awards around Indigenous Governance and maybe heavy on to them on the podcast as well, because I think there is much we can learn. We've just scratched the surface here.

Karen Mundine 19:18

And I think the other interesting thing is when I think about community too, you know, again, all these things that are kind of becoming trendy to talk about when it comes to boards. You know, it is thinking about regeneration, it's thinking about diversity, it's thinking about men and women and gender. It is thinking about age and how you bring younger people through and it's all of those things because these are all parts of a community and a society and so they need to have voice and they need to, there are places for them and roles for them to play.

Helga Svendsen 19:48

Absolutely the boardrooms of I was gonna say the boardrooms of Australia but the boardrooms of the world really need to represent the society that they pretend sometimes to represent, I think, it's not when there's just a couple of different people in there who are no different people at all it doesn't. And there can't be that breadth of conversation that is needed for good decision making and for innovation and all of those things. Absolutely.

So Karen, we can't wind up without touching on The Voice. It is 2023. We have a referendum this year around The Voice. And indeed, when I first heard you speak at the governance summit earlier this year, it was around The Voice and why it's important for boardrooms. So I'd love to touch on that, even though we have spoken on about it on the podcast previously. But tell me, why is The Voice important? And why is it important for the boardrooms of Australia? So,

Karen Mundine 20:40

The Voice and the upcoming referendum is really an opportunity for all Australians to support an in-principle request from First Nations Australians. I think it's important to remember that this is not a thing of the last couple of years. If I think back to being a kid growing up in community meetings, if I

think about my entire career, working with First Nations communities, and at the forefront of all those conversations has been how do we have the greatest say, in our lives? Colonisation interrupted, that millennia of good governance, and that millennia of doing things our way. And ever since then, the conversation has been about, what how do we get to have more say around things that impact and influence our lives? So this most recent conversation, when it comes from the Uluru Statement from the Heart, is a really, and I encourage anyone who hasn't read it to really go back and read it, it's a beautiful piece of writing.

It was the combination of a series of constitutional dialogues that happened around the country, a combination of 250 people coming together to say, it's important to have representation in the national constitution. And I think it's important to remember that back in 1901, there were only two references to Aboriginal people. And that was to exclude us in both time, so to exclude us from being counted in the census, and to exclude the new federal government from making laws on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And I guess that's kind of been indicative of our experience of modern Australia is that we are constantly being excluded. So to be acknowledged in the Constitution, Australian Constitution, as Australia's first peoples is really important. And then to give that some form and substance, to have that representation pull together through the idea of a body or a voice that is nationally representative. It's a really modest ask, it's a really simple thing. And it is a principle that all Australians get to have a say on through a referendum. Now, why should boards be thinking about this? Well, this is about reconciliation. This is about what does Australia look like? And for those organisations that have reconciliation action plans, or raps, most of them already do this. So part of having a RAP, one of the things we look at is, well, when you want to do something about reconciliation, where are you getting your advice from, and most organisations with a RAP will have some sort of advisory body from First Nations peoples, so whether it's made up of employees, or their industry colleagues, or other First Nations peoples, and what we find time and time again, is that those organisations get benefit from that advice. And again, this is not about limiting things. It's about broadening things up, it's not about saying one thing over another. It's been about having more voices at the table, more voices having a say, it's been very clear from the government that this, The Voice will be an advisory body. It doesn't change the primacy and the importance of parliament and government of the day, and parliament and government of the day will still need to make those decisions, it will just mean that they have a broader sounding board to hear what is important to the people that it's going to be most affected by.

Helga Svendsen 24:11

Thank you. I think that's a, I would hope that those in the Take on Board community have already given consideration to this in their boardrooms, but if you haven't yet, folks, now is the time to do so.

Karen Mundine 24:23

I think it's also worth mentioning that nothing else, let's just look at what the Close the Gap report says and that the continued disparity that we see, and the fact that things aren't working. So we need to do something different. And I think every board director would appreciate that if things are not working, if we're not getting the outcomes that we thought we should be getting, then maybe it's time to change tac and strategy and do something different. And here is a different strategy of how we might tackle these challenges.

Helga Svendsen 24:56

That's right and as you'd said much earlier, it's an invitation from First Nations people, to walk with them in this, and to do things differently in a way that we all hope will close the gap, which is good for everybody.

Karen Mundine 25:11

Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 25:12

Oh Karen, we have touched on a lot here, why reconciliation is important, Indigenous Governance, The Voice? What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Karen Mundine 25:24

I think it is that reconciliation is everyone's business. And everyone has a role and can play a role in making a difference, whether that's in your workplace, in the boardroom, in the way that you think about reconciliation of First Nations peoples, and even the way that you may end up voting in a referendum later this year. So it is everyone's business. We know that diversity and when we listen to the voices of First Nations peoples, we see better outcomes more generally, it is about being agile, it's about being innovative, it's about learning from the oldest continuing culture in the world. And I think that's something that we can all be really proud of.

Helga Svendsen 26:07

And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Karen Mundine 26:11

I think my team was to say, I was remiss if I didn't say our reconciliation.org.au website has everything you could need to know we've got some great Q and A's there around The Voice and we do encourage people to take the opportunity to learn and be educated. You know, we respect that everyone will have their own opinions, and there'll be diverse range of opinions. But all we're asking is for people to understand what's being actually asked of them and then to maybe go and have those conversations with the people that are around you.

Helga Svendsen 26:43

We will make sure there is a link to the Reconciliation Australia website in the show notes so people can find it easily. Thank you, Karen, thank you so much for being open to the conversation today and for showing up and having the conversation. I really appreciate it and I know others in the Take on Board community will also appreciate the wisdom that you've shared. So thank you for being here with us today.

Karen Mundine 27:03

Thank you. Helga, it's been fun.

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