

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 254



Transcript – Kate Larsen on what boards need to think about before making a statement on the war in Gaza

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Kate Larsen about what boards need to think about in commenting or even not commenting on the war in Gaza.

Helga Svendsen 0:09

Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me I'm on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present and any First Nations people that may be listening today, I acknowledge their continuing connections to land waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and I stand in solidarity with First Nations people for reconciliation, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now. Let me introduce Kate. Kate joined the board of Western Australia's youth arts peak membership organisation Propel Youth Arts when she was just 22 years old. Originally recruited for her marketing expertise, she was elected chair after only a few meetings, and helps lead the startup organisation through his first few years of operation. Since then, arts, cultural and not for profit governance is a topic that she has approached from all angles as a consultant, board member, CEO, Senior Manager, arts worker and independent practitioner reporting to boards, committees, steering groups and funding panels across a broad range of governance and business frameworks. Kate is a writer, arts and cultural consultant with more than 25 years experience in the not for profit government and cultural sectors in Australia, Asia and the United Kingdom. She's a thought leader in the areas of governance and cultural leadership, workplace culture, online communities and community led practice. Just the sort of person we love here at Take on Board. So welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Kate.

Kate Larsen 1:45

Thanks so much for having me.

Speaker 1 1:46

Thanks for literally well wasn't quite taking the call literally taking the message. I think I reached out cold on LinkedIn after reading some of what you've done and Kate was up for the convo one governance geek to the other. So it's great to have you here. Now, before we dig into how boards deal with Gaza and the war in Palestine, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. What was your earliest experience of governance?

Kate Larsen 2:10

Well, I grew up in congealing Albany, which is a tiny town in regional Western Australia. And I guess my first experience of governance were the invisible ones that many of us exist alongside, without knowing it. So I was a member of a youth theatre company. My first job when I moved to Perth, was in front of house, tearing tickets and selling programs or theatre shows, and they were worked in galleries. And unbeknownst to me at the time, they were all small to medium arts and cultural organisations incorporated under Western Australia's incorporated associations, legislation, all of which I didn't need to know in those capacities. And then as I became more and more involved in the arts as a worker, started to learn about what that meant. And as you said, I then became the board member. And then the chair of one of those small to medium arts organisations, the peak body for Youth Arts at just 22, I was chair by 23. And that was a new organisation that had been in development for several years. And I chaired it in its first few years of operation, knowing at that time, almost zero, about the theory behind governance practices. But let me tell you in the years since, and the research that I've been looking at and doing myself into, not for profit governance, although I at 22-23 had very little idea on that news-led board, not having an idea about what you're doing is not a characteristic restricted to age, unfortunately. So it is something that I've since witnessed of boards of all ages, and all levels of expertise across the sector.

Helga Svendsen 3:56

Well, I can see how you may have grown into the governance geek. And I mean that in obviously, in the best possible way that you are today from that, and it's, I'm interested that board though you were the chair at 23. And you're absolutely right, either not knowing what you're doing or feeling like you're not knowing what you're doing, because often people feel like they don't know what they're doing even when they absolutely do. What was the age range of the other people on that board?

Kate Larsen 4:22

It was a youth-led board, it was important for that organisation to have a majority of young people leaving the organisation, though it did that not just through the board, but also through its broader governance ecology that said that there was a larger range of ages, just in the same way there was a larger range of other expertise and demographics across those board members over the years. But yeah, so there was there was always a mix whilst ensuring that the organisation was led by and those decisions were informed by the people who had been set up to serve.

Helga Svendsen 4:57

You recently. I was going to say it was a blog was actually a tic toc. I think you did a video boards, we need to talk about Palestine, what prompted it. And then we'll talk about what your advice is to boards around this, what prompted it?

Kate Larsen 5:11

So, as you said, I've approached governance, from all angles, I have been a CEO reporting to boards, I've been a chair, supporting CEOs and everything in between, for about last seven years, I've been full time consulting, and primarily during that time, working in the governance space, and in the last several years leading a national conversation about some of the issues with our cultural and broader not for profit, governance legislation, and how I think it's setting boards up to fail. So that's a bigger conversation. But the research is showing us that boards, even in good times, which be like a very long time ago, even in good times and not delivering on nearly every single metric that they're measured against. And that's in spite of the fact that nonprofit governance in Australia, as elsewhere, is an extraordinary act, absolutely extraordinary act of mandated institutionalized generosity, without which our organisation's would literally not be allowed to exist. So I'm always very careful to try and start these conversations, by acknowledging that framework and acknowledging my incredibly deep and enduring respect for the board members in this picture in this puzzle, because it is a very hard thing to acknowledge that the system is failing us. And we are perhaps failing the system in spite of our best efforts. So that's been the focus of my work over these last five years. In particular, that even in good times, being a board member and supporting a board, whichever side of that equation you're on is much harder work than anybody would like it to be. And then when things go wrong, either within the organisation or within the context we're operating within, or even when just not necessarily things go wrong, but things change quickly. Because our organisations and decision making structures aren't set up to deal with things at speed, those existing failings, those existing kind of friction points, see, our organisations put in really, really risky situations really fast. And when we combine that with the fact that after the last, I don't even know how long we want to count, 3, 4, 10 years that the arts and cultural sector, which is where majority of my work, and passions lie has been doing it tough, the people within it and not our best selves. So we've got a problematic system and burnt out people coming together, as we're seeing in what's happened just since October last year, though, of course, we will already as the sector, incredibly depleted in this post pandemic, we're going to podcast so you can't see me doing my quote marks in

no way are we post pandemic, the impacts or the reality of that, and the impacts are still being very keenly felt. So we were already decimated, then we came through that straight out of a negative vote on the voice referendum and had no time to recover from that before the start of the genocide in Palestine. As a result, it's become a perfect storm of that sort of example, that I just talked about. So are existing systems, which are not set up to deal with big externalities, necessarily, or not set up to have the discussion about how what on one hand may appear like a distant geopolitical issue is actually on the other hand, having very real duty of care and financial bottom line impacts here at home.

Helga Svendsen 9:04

So and this is not at all doing justice to the background you just gave there. But the perfect storm of a whole range of factors. I was going to say culminating in I don't know if it is culminating in but added in a war in the Middle East. And you're like, Okay, I need to say something, I need to do something. There are organisations struggling here, there are boards struggling, I need to do something, which as I said at the top being a fabulous governance geek that you are, I need to do something to support the good governance of these organisations that I care so greatly about. So then with that context in mind about how that came about. We'll put links to all of the videos in the show notes, but obviously people are here listening to this conversation and have well may not have had the opportunity to say that as best you can. If you can summarize your advice there for boards in thinking about how to deal with the war in Palestine.

Kate Larsen 9:58

So when that perfect storm started hit we saw boards and organisations reacting in a number of different ways. And obviously those who have come later have learned some lessons from organisations who perhaps fumbled their responses earlier on. So in no way do I want to single anybody out for poor practice. But that's mostly because poor practice has become the status quo around this issue. We are seeing boards failing in multiple ways, we are seeing boards being critiqued for the institutionalised silence, which could manifest even as in something as seemingly innocuous as a business as usual social media feed. So something that is pretending that the world around us has not changed, we just carry on as usual, that is making their audiences including importantly, their paying audiences, people for whom they rely upon for their income, disassociate and even disinvest. From those organisations, including donors as well as audiences. We have seen some organisations rush out statements, and particularly early on, we saw a lot of both sides kind of statements, war is bad, peace is good, which really said absolutely nothing about what those organisations actually stood for what that meant in terms of ensuring freedom of speech for their artists, what it meant in terms of ensuring cultural safety, for the communities and audiences. Unfortunately, some of them when confronted with criticism, then double down, really dug their heels in. And there have been some absolutely horrific statements released by Australian arts and cultural organisations as well as broader sectors. But obviously, my interest is mostly focused on those arts orgs. And then we have seen others take some do care to release a statement, some of which have been picked apart, some of which have been more or less accepted, remembering, of

course, that everything is heightened right now. So this is not an academic exercise. This is not something that is happening over the other side of the world, the ripples of the Palestinian genocide are being felt here in the diaspora across all of the Australian arts and cultural communities and beyond. We're seeing artists being censored for their work, we're seeing organisations not stand up for their artists freedom of expression, we're seeing board members stepping down, we're seeing donors withdrawing their support, we're seeing philanthropic funders become less attractive because of who they support and who they don't. This is not a trend, this is a reckoning, this is having significant and I believe we'll have ongoing impacts across all of our sectors, all of our not for profit sectors. And we're seeing organisation after organisation falling at these hurdles. As I said, failure is the status quo right now. And that includes those who are kind of hanging on who are choosing that institutional finance path. So choosing maybe if we don't say anything, it will be overseen and we won't have to say anything. But as I said, that is causing damage to those organisations, reputations in the meantime, and in the future is likely to be having an impact on their financial bottom line and managing risk. Managing finance is absolutely board business.

Speaker 1 13:41

But Kate, what's the answer? Now? I'm guessing there is no one answer. It's not like, Oh, if you just do this, and then you just do that it will all be okay. But maybe there is. So if there is an answer, Kate, what is the answer? If there's not a simple answer? So what are some things the board's do need to consider then in tackling this or indeed other challenging situations for them? What are the things they need to consider? Or the answer?

Kate Larsen 14:06

So you're right, there is no answer. There is no one who is an expert in any of these issues and our organisations, hampered by the fact that we're trying to apply crisis communications and risk management protocols on top of already problematic governance systems on top of diminishing volunteering, including governance, volunteering, and a completely overwhelmed and burnt out cohort of board members. So when I say perfect storm, it really is perfect storm. It's a very challenging time, and maybe the most challenging that any board members have experienced. For me, while there is no easy solution, while there is no one way to get it, right. I think in the first instance having this conversation at board level that acknowledges that what's going on in Palestine is not limited to Palestine. But it is having implications for our staff, for our fellow board members for how we govern for how we raise money, including through sales, including through our philanthropic support, including through our government support for our communities that we represent and for their, including our audiences, that puts it very firmly into the realm of a risk management conversation for boards. And I think that makes it empowering, because it's about something that we have oversight of that we can move forward, rather than just kind of throwing our hands up in the air and saying, it's all too hard. And in fact, it's part of our fiduciary duty to respond in that way. So having the conversation, scheduling an agenda item in our board meetings is surely an easy first step. And way to start.

There's also now because we are seven months into this particular horror, this particular grief, there are now resources and examples, a lot, unfortunately, of bad practice examples from which we can learn, but also some emerging better practice examples that we can draw from, as well. And yes, the complexities of the situation are vast, and the overlaps of our communities and how, where they fall within that spectrum is vast and complex. So when we're having those conversations at board level, I think narrowing it down to our core purpose. And how that intersects with this issue can be a useful way to keep a focal point that we can build from so for example, within the arts and cultural sector, I don't think any artist, or anybody who loves or engages with the arts in any way, would argue with the fact that artists work is valuable, that artists have a right to life and to livelihood, that their stories should be able to be safely told. And that if we are in the business of telling those stories, we not only have an obligation to do so ourselves, but to support and create, and if needs be fight for the conditions fight for the rights of others in that situation. So I think coming back to those basic principles is a really good place to start. Other than that, it's obviously also better to have had preparatory conversations, that pre-emptive crisis before you're in a crisis. So we've missed that boat, we are now deep into an incredibly difficult time, but our duty of care as board members, to each other, to our organisations, to our staff that we employ to the communities that we serve to the audiences and stakeholders, that duty of care is enhanced during times of crisis not diminished, even though our personal capacity may have diminished. And even though the capacity of a board may have diminished as a result, our obligation, our fiduciary duty is enhanced. So finding time to have some of these big awkward conversations to not only address what we should say now, but to also plan for the future. So to look at our board agreements, to have the conversation about is there anything board members that we support as an organisation, if our board members don't support, that that's going to become an issue, to look at our partnership agreements? Is there anything that we are not happy to associate with? What happens if our partner challenges something that we do? Are we willing to sacrifice our work? Are we willing to sacrifice our artistic integrity if somebody threatens to take our funding away? So some of those being difficult conversations can help us articulate those values and set us up better for the future?

Helga Svendsen 19:06

Okay, I'm hearing in there that that you're, I mean, obviously, you're deep in the art sector and the arts and cultural sector. And I think that arts and cultural organisations are even more than some other organisations caught up in this perfect storm. And, you know, attention because they are arts and culture organisations, and they tell stories, some of the things that you've just said. And I think some of the things that you've talked about there are going to be helpful for any organisation, whether the arts and culture or not, but I'm wondering, from your perspective for other organisations that aren't in arts and culture, how the war in Palestine, the war in Gaza, impact those outside the arts? And is the advice the same or is the advice slightly different?

Kate Larsen 19:50

I think the advice is exactly the same as you say my work my research is through an arts and cultural lens and then for the nonprofit or for purpose. sector more broadly, but I work across all industries or sectors. And we're seeing this play out in ways that negligibly different across all of those industries in for profit spaces. For example, we're seeing less of a crisis around the reduction in governance, volunteerism, for example. But we're seeing perhaps a larger potential impact on earned income as a result of people making more values based decisions. Since the start of the pandemic, we're seeing a national, international actually, workforce crisis across not for all of it and commercial sectors that this is exacerbating, and a lot of that is being driven by, although it got a lot of bad press as the so called quiet quitters. What that is when we break it down, is actually people who have been traditionally taken advantage of in our workforces, actually reassessing their willingness to perpetuate the poor practices of the past. And that's obviously exacerbated hugely in the for purpose sectors. Because we were told, I have perpetuated in the past that this is the price we pay for working in a sector that we love, you know, that we sacrifice our financial well being, we sacrifice our relationships, in many, in many cases, certainly our mental and physical health. But that trend is playing out across all sectors. And because we're seeing that lower tolerance based on values based on ethics, that's having another huge ripple across all sectors as a result of Palestine as well. We're also seeing a similar lowering of tolerance, I think around the disappointing lack of intersectionality. And as a result, what appears to be hypocrisy in a lot of our organisations. So for example, in although what's happening in Palestine is already documented as an extraordinary act of ecocide. In the environmental organisations and the environmental services organisations, we're not seeing many of those organisations walk the talk, because again, they're somehow seeing it as a distant geopolitical issue, even though on a planetary level is having an insignificant impact that will have a direct impact on their work, as well. And I think we're seeing that happen across a lot of different areas. At the moment, a lot of feminist organisations are losing credibility, because of their lack of intersectional, advocacy around Palestine, and so on and so forth. Really, any point of intersection is being complicated, and organisations that are choosing one of those equally poor options to deliberately not make a statement to delay making a statement to make a rushed, or fumble statement, or failing at every hurdle.

Helga Svendsen 23:06

Okay, so what that prompts in my mind is, and this has nothing to do with the war on Gaza, but I'm thinking about, you know, I was previously on the board of a health service. And when we were talking about climate change, for example, and about the, you know, even the emissions in the hospital, I often wanted to connect that to the health impacts of climate change. And not inverted commas, just climate change, per se. So I think what I'm hearing there is around, much like you said, before, connect to purpose, what is the purpose of the organisation, and then think about the implications of whatever is happening outside. In this instance, we're talking about the war on Gaza, but it could be anything, think about the purpose of the organisation and then connect your position, your discussion and your position and your communications around that purpose. And thinking broadly around that purpose. I think that's what I'm hearing.

Kate Larsen 23:58

Yeah, absolutely. We're coming back to that purpose, but also reminding ourselves that our work doesn't happen in a bubble. So we're very used to once every couple of years as part of a strategic planning process, for example, doing a SWOT analysis or equivalent, where we might take that broader view. But in the day to day running of not for profit organisations or commercial businesses, we get very focused and boards get necessarily very focused on the minutiae, which is understandable. And the you know, we're in the middle of, as I said, a workforce crisis. We're in the middle of a cost of living crisis. These are not easy times, even when taken in isolation. However, we do our boards in our organisations a disservice when we don't retain that larger view, because this is not happening adjacent to our lives, this is not theoretical, this is have having implication for boards and board members in all sectors, in all shapes and sizes here in Australia right now.

Helga Svendsen 25:04

We talked about this off air that we could have this, this could be a 3 day episode. Because there is so much we've already touched on an enormous amount. And yet, I feel like there's an enormous amount we haven't yet touched on, from the conversation that we've had. What are the key things you want people to take away?

Kate Larsen 25:20

I think it's important to come back to duty of care. For me, the people in this picture, underpin everything, the people in this picture are struggling at every point of that spectrum, board members are in overwhelmed staff members are overwhelmed. Now the communities that we serve, or rely on for our income, are being affected in many different ways at the moment, and to ignore that is negligent to ignore that is a failure of our duty of care. In some of these industries, in some of these organisations and businesses, I think, as I said, this is going to be a reckoning, this is going to be a tipping point for not just what we do, but whether we have the support from our communities, from our constituencies from our clients to continue to do it. So choosing not to have a conversation is bad board business. And I think that's the scary bit. That's the stick on one side. But I think being the other side of that equation being open to a conversation being open and just human, to our communities to say, look, we don't know yet we're working through this, we take it really seriously. And we think it's really hard, can go a long way. Like we don't have to be the shiny, perfect, we have all the answers people. In fact, we've seen from the incredibly poor practice that's rolled out over the last six, seven months that that doesn't work. A lot of this is embedded in the fact that our organisations in Australia are not as accessible or as representative or as culturally safe as we would have liked them to be. And perhaps, perhaps we have once believed them to be, as I said, this multiple ongoing global and local crises have reduced tolerance for the poor practices of the past and have shown a very unflattering picture held up a very unflattering mirror to our sector and to the boards who govern them. So I think we need to be kind of mature and grown up enough to look at that to say, we take it seriously. And we're going to try. And I think in saying we're going to try and then actually following through can go a really long way to making a really big difference.

Helga Svendsen 27:59

Robust conversations on complex matters. It's extraordinary for boards, it should be bread and butter, and it doesn't always happen. Oh, now is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community? And I will say I'll put links to your website and some of your previous videos about this and other awesome governance stuff in the show notes. But is there another resource perhaps that you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Kate Larsen 28:25

I'm doing a lot of reading at the moment. So I've got some great resources that I'd like to share. One is that I'm one of the editors of The Relationship is the Project which just we launched last month, it's a guide to community engaged practice, I've got a chapter in there on duty of care that I highly recommend the chapters on the role of the institution, and cultural safety beyond inclusion and diversity, I think are particularly relevant for all organisations right now. I'm also really grateful for the work of Vu Le, and the Nonprofit AF blog. Vu is out of Seattle. I'm a great fan of his work. And he's doing writing some fantastic provocations around the role of boards, but also the role of funders in addressing some of these issues.

Helga Svendsen 29:12

Okay, well, we will include links to both of those in the show notes as well. There's going to be a long list of show notes. So I can say for those of you that are out walking and listening, which is how I listen to podcasts, and I often hear this bit at the end and go, No, I'm going to miss all the resources, just go to the website. You'll find them there. If you're out walking, and this is about to disappear from your podcast, listening app. Oh, Kate, somehow I suspect this might not be our last conversation. I certainly hope it's not our last conversation at all. But I suspect it won't be our last conversation on air either. Thank you so much for as I say, taking the call, metaphorically to come and talk about some of these issues and to present the provocations as you put it that you have done previously to boards as well. It's incredibly valuable work. So thank you for all that you do and thank you for being with us here on the Take on Board podcast today.

Kate Larsen 30:02

Thanks so much for having me.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>