

Take on Board

Transcript – Kate Waterford



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Kate Waterford about her experiences of building a skilled and diverse board. First, let me tell you about Kate. Kate is the chair of two organizations as can Freedom Project an anti trafficking charity and Australasian Birth Trauma Association. She's also a board member at Physiotherapy board of Australia and Corryong Health and a Councillor, AICD ACT Divisional Council. She's also the chair of Amnesty International Australia's nominations committee and on the Governance Committee for the Fred Hollows Foundation. Already, I don't know how you can keep up with all of what she does, and I'm about to tell you what she does for her day job. Katee is also a partner of Canberra law firm Maliganis Edwards Johnson, where she leads a practice in health and medical law. And she edits a major legal Encyclopedia of medical law. I'm exhausted just listing all of this. So it helps to know that Kate is an eternal optimist when it comes to finding ways to work towards a better world. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Kate

Kate Waterford 0:54

Thank you so much Helga.

Helga Svendsen 0:56

Oh, my God, it's so awesome to have you here. As background, folks, Kate, Kate, you just messaged me on LinkedIn one day saying, I've been listening to the podcast, and it's awesome. And we got into a bit of a chat. And before you know it, you're part of the Board Accelerator program. And before you know it, you're now here as a guest on the podcast.

Kate Waterford 1:09

That's absolutely right. In fact, I was on my way to a board meeting down in Victoria, which was about a four hour drive for me. And they quickly Googled on my podcast app, board related podcasts and listened to you for four hours straight.

Helga Svendsen 1:23

Oh, we became friends without me even knowing it, which I love. So Kate, before we talk about building skilled and diverse boards, and you're experiencing that, as always, I love to dig a bit deeper about you. And we'll work with the questions that some might not just introduce more recently this year. So let's start Where were your mum and dad born? And do you know where your ancestors are from?

Kate Waterford 1:44

My mum was born in Brisbane and my dad was born on a sheep property and northwestern New South Wales. And my ancestors are mainly Scottish, Irish and English.

Helga Svendsen 1:52

Where were you born? And what about siblings?

Kate Waterford 1:54

I came from Canberra. And I have three sisters. So I often say that's why I have a lifelong love of women's networks. And also very good mediation skills because I'm one of the middle siblings. The four girls,

Helga Svendsen 2:05

Oh my god, I'm laughing Riley because I'm one of three girls and I'm the middle sibling. I'm the youngest sibling, the middle sibling, I think probably share some of your mediation skills. She was Switzerland and our family. So for where you grew up the traditional owners of where you grew up.

Kate Waterford 2:18

So I grew up on the lands of the Ngunnawal people here in Canberra

Helga Svendsen 2:21

And how many languages do you speak?

Kate Waterford 2:23

So one of my favorite questions, but I haven't got a very straight down. So first started learning languages when I was a 15 year old exchange student for a year, you would have heard from answer before that I'm mainly British, so all my family members just speak English. But at 15 I spent a year in Denmark and learnt Danish fluently, and now speak Spanish fluently because my husband's Spanish and it's our main family language. I speak French quite well my daughter's doing a bilingual French education. And I can read a novel in plenty of other languages Swedish, Norwegian, German, etc. I used to speak pretty good Aria, which is an Indian language similar to Hindi when I lived in India, but it's almost completely disappeared a decade later. And because I studied linguistics and just love languages, I've studied the languages wherever I've traveled, I've done short courses in Swahili, Quechua, Thai, currently learning a bit of Basque and more.

Helga Svendsen 3:11

Oh, my Lord, I love those questions, because you've just learned so much about people. That is amazing, Kate, I had no idea about that. So I'm one of those people who only speaks English, a tiny smattering of and I mean, tiny, like mattering of Italian and an even tiny smattering of Spanish from travels, you know, you understand culture so much better when you can speak the language of those countries. So that is incredible. What?

Kate Waterford 3:33

That's absolutely right. In fact, I think it's shaped a lot of who I am. And the things that I value as a board member, which we might get onto a bit more later. But learning a new language is almost learning about a whole new perspective on the world and a new way of understanding things and breaking ideas apart. You can talk about the same thing in two or three different languages and just find new ways of understanding it. So I just think language is absolutely eye opening. And so, you know, you've traveled a lot by the sounds of things, but where do you feel your place or your home is my home is definitely in Canberra. And I did have a lot of years of traveling and living all over the place, particularly my late teens and my 20s but I came back to my birth place to roost and in fact, I went a step further and ended up buying my childhood home from my parents. So I took over my dad's huge book collection and all of the other things my mom's garden and my kids growing up now with in my childhood bedroom, so it's very special.

Helga Svendsen 4:22

Oh my goodness. So your home in your home you're like you're literally the home you grew up in is now the home your children can grow up in in your home of Canberra.

Kate Waterford 4:30

That's absolutely right. And although we're quite International in some ways, as I said, my husband Spanish so we have lots of languages bouncing around the house, but I feel like a true Canberran and absolutely love it here. It's a lovely city to live in. Actually I'm checking in your kids. How many languages do they speak so they're growing up trilingual? We speak Spanish at home and they both go to French speaking schools.

Helga Svendsen 4:49

What an incredible gift

Kate Waterford 4:50

To me having grown up only with English until quite a late age. I think it's just an absolute privilege to watch. Such a gift.

Helga Svendsen 4:58

Oh God, Kate, I could play in that space for this whole conversation, but I'm going to force myself to also talk about your experience building a skilled and diverse board because I know that's something that people will also get a lot of value from. So let's play there. You know, I know you've had some experience in this through your MST International Australia experience. So building a skilled and diverse board, I guess first for you, what does a skilled and diverse board look like?

Kate Waterford 5:21

Well, I think the most important thing about it is that there are people on the board who think differently from each other, and have a really different range of experiences that they've been through in life and professional training that they have, that they can bring to the table when the board picks apart problems, considered issues, challenges, pushes back on develops management, because it's those differences between us that actually complement or create our, our most effective space for decision making. As a group, I think that actually my love of languages is very closely connected to that because experiences of living myself overseas in places where I was the different one I was the one who had different experiences a different language, a different cultural background, led me to understand the benefits in diversity, often on boards or in other sorts of different professional groups. There can be concentrations of particular skills and experiences, which just mean that people echo each other's thoughts or congratulate each other on the decisions that they think the others are taking rightly, which which may very well be an effective way of operating in some circumstances. But it's really only when that testing process happens through different perspectives and ideas that the board can be sure that it's making the best quality decisions. I

wanted to talk to you in this about my experiences on Amnesty International, Australia's board. Amnesty International, Australia is one of the boards and organizations I've been most committed to over the years, and everybody who's listening to the podcast, I imagine will be very familiar with its work. It's an organization that prioritizes and cherishes diversity and all sorts of different ways. But at the time, I joined the board in 2014, it didn't really have diversity in skills and experiences built into its governance structures on the board, I hope to tell you a little bit about how we pulled that apart and changed it and the benefits that we've got from them.

Helga Svendsen 7:09

Oh, my God, it would be great to hear that story. Because it is, it's often a challenge for board members or chairs. It's almost a where should we begin? Like, we know that we need to do something, but where do we start that process. And often it's not a nice, neat linear process. Let's just do this. And then let's do this. And tada, everything will be perfect. So I would love to hear your story. Where should we begin,

Kate Waterford 7:28

It's not necessarily an experience that every other organization will want to replicate, because diversification will look very different in different settings on boards. And but I think it's an interesting story. So had to agree. So I was first appointed to a board, which had a regional representation structure. And I think a lot of organizations do follow this sort of may sound quite familiar to some of you. But we had 14 people, half of them were representatives from a regional level, and half of them were nationally elected. And it was a really great group of people, fantastic friends, talented people. And that regional diversity in particular brought some real strengths. And of course, having 14 people around the table can also have some benefits as well, because just the fact of the numbers of people meant that there were often different views and experiences and ideas. But after some analysis, we worked out the structure, although it favored regional diversity, it didn't have much other diversity. And in particular, Amnesty often attracts a lot of lawyers. And we decided that we needed to pull things about a bit to increase that diversity in a way that worked for our organization, our values, our membership, Amnesty is a membership organization, and many of its members will have been involved for decades and care about it very deeply and have a lifelong commitment to the organization, their volunteering is very much integrated into their lifestyle. So this sort of change was not something that the board could just decide on itself. And we had to do quite an extended labor of love and consultation before we fixed on a final structure, which was very specific to the organization's needs. And that involved consultation with the membership consultation with the regional structures, consultation with the Australian Institute of company directors, and various other points of engagement with people who are involved in it. Now these days, 2022. And the last few years, Amnesty has a board that is seven members strong, with an additional up to two members on top of that, and everybody's elected at the AGM at a national level. And one of the key changes is that we have a nominations committee and I'm now the chair of that. And it's our job, not to choose the directors but to do really thorough deep analysis each year about the needs of the board, and to recruit and interview and analyze all the different candidates

for the board and analyze their life experiences, their skills, their leadership attributes, and all the different things that they might bring to the table as a board director. So it's actually ended up increasing almost every type of diversity on the board. It's created a board which has much better skills across a whole range of new areas. And it's building new lived experiences and new personal attributes of different clients. And I think it's really helped the voters and also the board itself. To understand more about the skills and weaknesses of not only those individuals that choosing between those elections, but also the strengths and weaknesses and gaps of the overall board group, thinking about this, I realized this amnesty structure in the process isn't for every board. And I certainly haven't copied it myself exactly on any of the other boards, I sit on a chair. But I think probably what is relevant for every board is that importance of really pulling apart why your organization needs diversity, and what type of diversity they need, and the different types of life experiences on top of professional skills that the board might need and how that would be helpful. And then have regular discussions about all those different things that people bring to the table and where the gaps are, and explore creative solutions for that.

Helga Svendsen 10:44

It's interesting I think, hearing that that focus on the why, you know, I imagined for Amnesty International coming from a regional representatives half the board's Regional Representatives house nationally appointed through to all been nominated at AGM. I'm guessing there are some interests in that process when that change comes about. And if people aren't clear on the why at the outset, then sometimes those sorts of processes can be dismantled along the way, shall we say or not successful? Because there's some different interests at play there? Was that part of the experience there? Can you shed any light for us on that?

Kate Waterford 11:13

A really interesting topic, isn't it because there's often representatives who sit on boards, representatives of organizations, geographic regions, or other people who are there for a particular purpose. And off when organizations move away from structure like that there is a loss of some kind, and the numbers or the supporters or whoever else that stands behind that representation system, they might be losing something, they might feel that they lose their voice to the board. So I think if an organization goes through a change like that, it has to look for other ways that it can make people, those people but all the members and stakeholders more generally how they can still have that voice through to the board and still feel that they are represented in a different way, or addressed or heard or, or dealt with in a different way?

Helga Svendsen 11:55

Absolutely. It's hearing what people have to say and working with that. And the other thing I heard when you were sharing some of that story was there was a quite an extensive consultation process. So I'm assuming through that consultation process, you heard all sorts of different ideas, challenges,

opportunities, and then as much as possible, worked with those opportunities. And as much as possible, overcame those challenges or barriers, I guess, is there any particular challenges or opportunities that might be useful to share with the tech on board community?

Kate Waterford 12:20

Oh, well, I certainly encourage everyone listening to consider throwing up their hand for nomination to the amnesty board, we've just been through an election process now. But so it's, it's a year away from the next one. But it's just the most fabulous organization to be involved in. I do have an opportunity currently available on a different board, the oscam Freedom Project, which is terrific anti trafficking charity, which has quite a different size, purpose governance structure, but still has a really big commitment to the idea of diversity of skills in that organization. So if people are interested in joining an anti trafficking charity that's helping a lot of girls over in Cambodia, and has big dreams for other Southeast Asian countries, feel free to look me up on LinkedIn.

Helga Svendsen 13:00

Oh, awesome. For that one. What are you looking for? In particular, I'm gonna come back to challenges about skilled in diverse boards in a moment, but for that particular opportunity, what are you what are you looking for, just so people know whether it's the right thing for them?

Kate Waterford 13:10

Sure. One of the things that we're particularly looking for, at the moment, fundraising skills, always in demand in charities, but also a broader leadership skills, life experience, potentially, of having worked in development, having worked in, in a Southeast Asian country, or Cambodia, partnership building quite a list.

Helga Svendsen 13:29

So I just want to skip back to this process. With Amnesty International, you were clear on your why you were clear on what you wanted to look for you had a big consultation process, you came up with something that was specific to the organizational needs. And you've moved from this 5050 Representative National Board of 14 people through to a board of seven, I'm guessing in there, there were some challenges that you had to work through to get to that outcome in as much detail as you're able to share is there any of those that you're able to outline that might again, might be helpful to others that are listening that might be going on a similar journey?

Kate Waterford 13:59

One of my personal processes involved in becoming a I think a better board member has been actually listening and respecting the voices of others. I think when I first became a board director, and I was coming from a background as a lawyer, I always thought that I had the right answer. And it was just about outlining it and convincing people of it and they go, but of course I don't always know the right answer. And sometimes you get to a much better answer through listening and working things out. So as I said, one of the first things that we did was go to the AICD, the Australian Institute of company directors and get a fabulous paper, discussion paper documenting, you know, the the best practices in governance structures these days, we held consultations with members and we also had an incredible workshop that was facilitated by a former podcast guest of yours Rosslyn Noonan over from an international New Zealand who got people to talk very frankly and openly about these these different intersecting but often challenging needs that they had and wanted and how we would come together around our values and what we wanted the organs decided to do to improve our governance structures and change the way that the board operated. While not losing too much of that, that activist voice that member voice directly through to the board, we came up with a fantastic idea, I think, out of that workshop, which was something called a big activism forum, where alongside the AGM, sometimes at different times of the year, there's a big forum held around human rights issues, where ideas and causes that people might previously have discussed with their local regional representative who lived in the next suburb to them and went along to all the same local committee meetings, they can now bring up at an activist forum and activism forum can have dealt with in different ways. So it's changed a little bit how certain issues are dealt with by the board. And I can make the board overall a lot more effective. But it took a couple of years. It wasn't just one stakeholder event. And the solution was arrived at that. It was a couple of years of working through discussions and understanding people's needs understanding where people might have been resistant to change, or they don't just resist change for no reason. It's because they see benefits in in certain aspects of the status quo or want to make sure that change happens in the right way for the right reasons. And that the organization remains at its core, the thing it's supposed to be. So I think we got more in the end. But yes, it was, it was a couple of years of hard work around those all those different issues. And I think probably large, influential organizations like amnesty, which would probably take a couple of years to make change of that kind

Helga Svendsen 16:24

Absolutely, like a couple of years I think is obvious answer things like it's done. Well, I think change is always a consultation process and consultation takes time. As you say, it's not just oh, let's get around together. What do you think, Oh, great. Now let's go that way, there is back and forth, and back and forth. And thinking and pondering and pivoting ideas as well, like I'm guessing along the way, like the why was clear, but the watch might have changed along the way as it should, in a good two way process. Three way four way 10 Way process.

Kate Waterford 16:51

If I can perhaps use quite an example of quite a different organization that has different diversity needs. But it might illustrate as well a bit of that point around Amnesty. You mentioned at the beginning of the podcast that I'm the chair of the Australasian Birth Trauma Association. And that is a not for profit, that's focusing on preventing birth trauma, and also supporting families who've been through birth trauma and encouraging better healing. When we look at the sorts of life experiences and skills that you might want on a board like that, you get to 2030 different people. And you'd almost never run out. So you know, you'd want an obstetrician or midwife, maybe a nurse might be a physiotherapist, all these different clinical skills, you might want somebody who has experience in public health or hospital management, you go through all the usual professional skills like lawyers, accountants, people who are good at fundraising, marketing, etc. And you also might consider it very important, we do consider it very important to have good consumer and community representation. Does that mean you have someone who's suffered every type of birth trauma, because there are many forms? Now the different types of child loss? Who's recovered? Well, who's recovered badly? How many of these different life experiences do you actually capture, and each time that you limit that because you have to limit it, my board can have 20, or 30, or 40 people, you're making choices about which of those different life experiences are most important to have represented and heard on the board. And often, if organizations have particular types of representation, or particular skills carved out to come to the board, it necessarily means the exclusion of others. And so I think that's why you have to interrogate quite regularly? Well, if we've got this type of diversity prioritize, does it mean that we're actually losing out in terms of the other Amnesty had someone from every state in Australia, which was fantastic geographic representation, which gives a lot, but we were working on refugee issues without a refugee on the board, or we were working on indigenous issues with minimal indigenous representation on the board. And so even with 14 people, there are all sorts of things that you could say that we really hadn't included in our diversity. I think they're both excellent examples of just reminding us that with those opportunities around whatever it may be, but in this instance, diversity does come loss and being clear on that, why, as you said before, and what it means, you know, if we stick with Model A means we are losing out on these things. And if we move, we can pick up these things, even if we lose those out. So how do we create a model that can still hear voices that may not be in the boardroom, some of the regional voices, for example, that don't need to be in the boardroom, but are still heard by the board. It's a great example. As you know, I'm on a hospital board as well. And one of the great things is being able to hear the consumer inverted commas patient voice, consumer voice, whatever different health services call their people that use their services, or involved in our services, because it might not even be directly it could be families as well. And having those voices included in a really meaningful way. You know, on our board, we have called the consumer advisory committee or as a community advisory committee, one or the other. But we've also incorporated into some of the other committees, the consumer voice as well. And even on some interview panels as well. So there are other ways of incorporating that great examples, both of them. Sometimes doing that skills matrix process at a board level helps you to say, Okay, well, we're not gonna be able to have that on the board. But let's work out the other ways that we have available to us to hear those voices and to build it into board decision making.

Helga Svendsen 20:00

Yeah, absolutely. And on government boards, for those that are involved in government boards, often, you actually don't have a choice about who is in the boardroom. So being able to include those voices in different ways is even more important, because you just don't control who's you influenced, but don't control who's on the book in the boardroom. Okay, both of those stories so valuable, I think in terms of your own experience, and just being able to share that to take on board community. So what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Kate Waterford 20:25

Interrogate what your board is doing with respect to the structures and processes for the composition of the board, look for creative ideas, and all boards, whatever their size should really be doing regular review of their skills, their attributes, their life experiences, what they need, and what they have to ensure that they're engaging in good governance. I also made the point that it does take different forms in every organization, but boards should really be thinking about the ways that they can mix up their thinking to challenge ideas better, and create a bit of quality of decision making on the board in a way that works for them and their organization and their values.

Helga Svendsen 21:03

Absolutely, yeah, I loved how you referred to it, it needs to be a tailored approach. It's not diversity is not the same for each organization. So I love that, is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community,

Kate Waterford 21:14

So you got to see this and I didn't immediately have my own TED talk or book or anything else to promote. But I did want to share my last few books that I read that I just loved so much, and I hope that some of your other podcast listeners would to my latest favorite books from indigenous authors, sand talk, can indigenous thinking save the world by Tyson younger Porter, it's a few years old now, I think. But it is one of those books that I just read, put post it notes everywhere, you know, Asterix everywhere to come back and just really challenged my way of thinking about the way that that we think, and also my tidur, my sister by Anita Heiss who has written a fantastic book about Indigenous women's experiences and the ways that, that they can support each other, and also the ways that they that they need support and encouragement and, and championing. I was so impressed by that book. And I was delighted to hear you mentioned that she had received an order of Australia a couple days ago. I think that's very well deserved. Absolutely, yes. I can't remember which level she got. But I think it was one of the higher ones and absolutely well deserved. Thanks so much for recommending those books I'm going to get on borrowbox as soon as I'm off this to see if I

can find them either in written or in the audio form, which I love listening to books on audio. So they are both fantastic. Thank you.

Helga Svendsen 22:21

Kate, thank you so much for joining us today. In fact, thank you for reaching out and just sending me a message saying that you'd spent four hours in the car with me being such an open and helpful member of the take onboard community from that first message. And, of course, for joining us here today on the take on board podcast.

Kate Waterford 22:35

Thank you so much Helga, it's been an absolute pleasure to to meet with you today. And I never imagined when I had those four hours in the car listening to podcast after Podcast with your fabulous guests that I would assume myself be appearing.

Helga Svendsen 22:48

Well, there you go, folks, if you're in the car or even not in the car, listening to the podcast, feel free to reach out to me because I really love getting messages from people and you never know you might be the next guest on take on board as well. Again, Kate, thanks for being awesome. I don't know how you fit it all in. I'm exhausted just reading your bio. But thanks so much for being with us today. And for as I say being such an active helpful member of the technical community