Transcript – Leanne Hart explains what boards need to understand about psychosocial hazards

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Leanne Hart about the board's role in managing psychosocial hazards.

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 connection to land otters, Sky, culture and country. I support voice trading 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 Leanne.

Leanne was formerly on the board of alongside PTSD partner support, an organisation focused on PTSD education for the partners and families of frontline and emergency service first responders. Today, she is the founder of Hart2Heart Wellbeing. She's a trauma informed facilitator and coach who helps leaders get on top of the things that cause stress at work, so they and their team can feel better and do better. Leanne takes an integrated approach to workplace wellbeing and combines her local and global experience and qualifications in people and culture, leadership development, management, embodiment coaching, exercise, fitness, fitness, management, and community yoga. She knows a bit this Leanne, which is why we got her here today. So welcome to the Take on Board, podcast, Leanne. Thanks,

Leanne Hart 1:31

Thanks Helga, I'm delighted to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:33

So, before we dive into managing psychosocial safety, which I'm very keen to have a chat about, and I know people would love to hear about but before we do that, I would just like to dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me about your upbringing, and what lessons you learned and what you've got up to, and the leading influences on how you thought and what you did.

Leanne Hart 1:53

I grew up on Goreng Goreng country in Central Queensland. And I would say I had a pretty privileged upbringing in that I got to spend a lot of time outdoors, lots of time playing. So boats and camping and beach and snorkelling and windsurfing, and surrounded by my small family, but a lot of family friends as well. So that that time in nature and connection has always been a really important part of my life, and continues to be as well. It was a beautiful era when as a teenager, you could go out all day, leave home early in the morning, come back for dinner, and no questions asked. And everybody got back safely. And it was the day before social media, which I think was quite a blessing. My parents were probably my largest influence growing up, I'd say and in particular, my father who mentored a lot of different people, and probably didn't even realize he was doing it, I would often see him coming and coaching people, whether it was workmates or family members, if they were struggling, and particularly if they had interpersonal challenges. And I thought, wow, there's a real skill to be able to do that, to be able to support people and to be able to have a positive influence on people in that way. And it was a really big influence for me growing up, I was brought up, respecting others and treating people the way that we thought we should be treated in return so that Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. And the other thing my father always used to say is you get to sleep when you're dead, which resulted in us spending a lot of time doing and not a lot of time just sitting around or resting. That's changed over the last six or seven years. And I've realized that resting is a really crucial part of being able to restore and enable us to be the best. So we came on, we're out there doing all the things.

Helga Svendsen 3:40

I was thinking as I did your introduction, maybe community yoga, and exercise science and fitness management and so on. I don't know of a resting for you, or is that still not resting?

Leanne Hart 3:52

I spend quite a bit of time resting because and yeah allows me to do that other stuff really well. And resting as a part of yoga, resting as a part of a dedicated practice for 1520 minutes a day. Instead of feeling guilty that you should be doing something all the time or it's a sunny day, I should be out doing something. Rest is actually doing something. And I think once I change that mindset, the rest is its own thing. And it's vital to us. Being able to look after our own well being changed my whole relationship with it.

Helga Svendsen 4:23

Resting and doing nothing heavy, inverted commas because it is indeed still doing something. But I remember years ago I used to put in my diary, I think it was on a Wednesday night, do nothing like I slotted out Wednesday nights for doing nothing. That didn't always work out that I was doing nothing but I'm the sort of person whose diary rules my life. So if I didn't put do nothing in my diary, I would fill it up with doing something. So yeah, super important to have the downtimes as well to replenish us to do the uptimes is your dad still with us?

Leanne Hart 4:52

He's not no he passed away over 20 years ago now but yeah, his legacy and the things that I observed in him how had a really big influence on me. And at the time, I didn't think so. But as I've gotten older, and as I've ended up in the workspace that I'm in, I see that influence come through more and more.

Helga Svendsen 5:11

Well, that's a beautiful legacy to him, then, let's dig into the topic, psychosocial hazards, the board's role in managing that as part of their governance and risk, and maybe even some practical things that boards can do to protect well being. Let's start with what are psychosocial hazards, because that might help boards to be on the lookout of how they can incorporate that into their thinking. So let's start there.

Leanne Hart 5:33

So psychosocial hazards at work aspects of work or situations that may cause a stress response, and in turn can lead to psychological or physical harm. They may arise from the way that work is designed or managed, the environment that somebody's working in the equipment or plant that they're using, or this is where I see it most commonly, through workplace interactions or behaviours. Now often, it's a case of having to look at the duration, the frequency and severity of some of these hazards, to work out how greater risk that presents to the people that work there, and the organisation itself. There's 14 hazards in total, and they really well documented by Safe Work Australia. And some of those include things like violence and aggression, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions. But even things like lack of role clarity are a big one is job demands, when people have excessively high job demands, or in some cases, really low job demands. That sounds strange to think of it like that. But if somebody doesn't have enough to do that can also be detrimental on their mental health, depending on the context of that. So there are good things for boards to become aware of, to learn more about and to understand the role that they can play in positively impacting that.

Helga Svendsen 5:34

So there's different kinds of regulatory frameworks, I guess, around Australia, and probably indeed, around the world in relation to psychosocial hazards. Although, even if Victoria, where you and I both are, and I'm on a couple of Victorian government boards, even if we don't have the regulatory framework about it, it's probably a good idea for boards to be on the lookout for psychosocial hazards, anywhere you look at it. So whether it's regulated or not. So boards often have, I don't know, they'll have health and safety metrics. Or they'll have a risk framework that might have health and safety and other things. Or they might be looking at the culture, kind of metrics, and so on. Are those the sorts of things that will give boards some insight around these, like, where should they be looking?

Leanne Hart 7:48

So there is a specific risk register and risk assessment that can be done just for psychosocial hazards. And I think that's a great place for both the CEO and the board to start. So it's drilling down, yes, having that as part of your overall risk register and your risk management processes, but drilling down even further into each of those hazards. And looking at the frequency, the severity and the duration of them, to see what risks they do present. Just because they're a hazard doesn't always mean they're going to be a risk. And that will depend on the context in which your organisation works. And you might already have some great mitigating factors in place and have some great initiatives that are providing a level of protection for people already. So just because it's the hazard doesn't mean it's a risk. But I think the danger is when there's just no visibility of them, or you're not looking at them at all, then there's a higher risk that you're going to miss something that's really important.

Helga Svendsen 8:45

That is such a good point that a hazard doesn't make all the risk.

Leanne Hart 8:49

Not necessarily it can but not necessarily.

Helga Svendsen 8:52

That's right, because there would be many workplaces where there will be risks around these things. There will be psychosocial changes, they will absolutely be there and you can't stop some of it.

Leanne Hart 9:03

And sometimes the it's interesting on their own, they may not be but in combination, they may. So if you had people that are out working remotely, perhaps they're visiting communities on their own, they have poor supervisory support, they don't have a lot of clarity around the role that they're doing. They're exposed to violent yelling or abuse from clients or visiting or people within the community. All of those in combination can create quite a risk for the individual staff member or the volunteer. One of those alone may not be but when you combine them all together, now somebody's working in an isolated way. They're not really sure what they're doing. They're copying a bit of abuse, and they don't feel like they've got the support of somebody to debrief or to discuss that with that can all add up and present quite a risk to an organisation. So one of the things I think it's important for boards to be aware of is understand what the firsthand experience is all your employees and volunteers. If you know what they're facing on a day to day basis, then that puts you in a better position to manage and evaluate some of those hazards in the first place.

Helga Svendsen 10:11

So how is it? Do you think the boards can get across that there's always that tricky line between, as they say noses in fingers out. Yet, you still need to really understand what's going on for staff members. But it's a tricky line, because you don't want boards to interfere either you want them to understand, yet not interfere in the operations of the organisation? How can boards get a better understanding? As you ran through that example, a moment ago about, you know, there was various things in there, but one of them was people aren't particularly clear on what they're doing. Now, my punt is, most organisations think their staff are clear on what they're doing. Boards would say, yes, they are the CEOs would that the leadership team would say they clear on what they're doing. Staff might not say that. So how do you get past that and find out what's really going on?

Leanne Hart 10:58

Ask them. And that's a bit of a scary thought. But the consultation part of evaluating the hazards is really crucial one, and some of the work that I do with my own clients is doing running focus groups to look at the psychosocial hazards with teams and to give them an open space to be able to talk about what does day to day life look for you look like for you on the job? What sort of things do you feel Yeah, potential issues? Or are things happening for you on a regular basis? Or are they one off things that you might have experienced that you just put down to the environment that you work in? Particularly in the not for profit and social sector? Yeah, it's challenging environment. And some there's some inherent hazards that come with the job in the spaces that people work in. So I think there's also putting that lens on what's reasonable and practical to expect people to be safe and protected from in a working environment? versus what is a known hazard? And are we giving people the right training for that in advance? And are we giving them the tools and skills to be equipped to deal with those difficult situations with clients or beneficiaries as they come up? So back to your question, what can we do asking people for their experience and to to be able to share that can either be via a survey tool, it can be in focus groups, particularly if you're a small organisation. And

often having someone external do that can be a very different process and have very different results than somebody internally doing that, particularly board members. I have had occasions where board members have probably intervened or asked questions of a couple of employees as opposed to everybody. And I think that's where you get a lot of challenges, that you're just getting a very narrow perspective, or very narrow view of what's going on. And you're not getting the full perspective of what's happening across all employees and volunteers. So finding a way to give everybody a voice with that. And doing it in a way that gives us some safety can give a board and a CEO or leadership team very different information from what they think might be going on.

Helga Svendsen 13:10

Indeed, it's getting under the hood, isn't it and knowing that you're getting under the hood of either everyone or a reasonable cross section of everybody, I'm thinking in larger organisations, you can't necessarily have a one on one with hundreds of people. And you might not even be able to invite hundreds of people to focus groups. But I guess there's the options of surveys and focus groups and one on one and those sorts of things to build in together. So maybe it's the invitation as well, knowing that there's psychosocial hazards, kind of assessing them, I guess, and knowing that, yes, they exist, what have we got in place to assess what's particularly impacting us as an organisation? And what are we doing to make it better for people so that it doesn't become a risk or doesn't become a big risk? So the middle part been identifying it? What can boards be doing? What can they be testing with their leadership teams and so on, about what's if it's been identified that a particular psychosocial hazard is a risk. And there's some controls being put in place to minimize that risk? What should boards be looking at what questions should boards be asking to make sure the you know, the system is robust around that.

Leanne Hart 14:17

I think having it on the agenda at board meetings as a really important place to start. Yes, health and safety can come up in meetings, but doesn't always. And I think unless you're having those active conversations or asking questions about it, it might be things that are not necessarily raised. So having the board's start by asking about it is a great place to start. If the board are taking an active interest in the well being of the CEO, that's also a great place to start. If the CEOs wellbeing is suffering, then there's a really good chance that the well being of other people in the team is as well. So the board chair may have a responsibility to work really closely with the CEO to make sure that well being as protected and allowing them to be the best that they can, I would suggest that boards even nominate someone to take the lead on well being. And that becomes really critical if there's a risk that requires escalation. So if something happens if an incident happens to a staff member, so they're out working remotely, and rather than waiting for the whole board, to have a discussion about it, it's often useful to have one person on the board or on the committee that can take the lead for that that knows what to do, if the situation escalates from a work health and safety perspective, or if they need to be able to share information back to other board members in a timely manner. So having someone that can take the lead, having a well being strategy, and that doesn't need to be complicated. It can be a really simple document, one page document that talks about

what the key areas are to focus once you've identified the psychosocial risks that you have, what you're putting in place to mitigate those or manage those and other things that you could do. If you've got time and resources and energy to do it. We know that community organisations and nonprofits don't always have a lot of any of that. But there's usually one thing that you can do to make a start and making a start is better than not making a start at all.

Helga Svendsen 16:14

That's right, making a start and seeing how it goes like, Okay, here's our wellbeing strategy for this year. Let's give it a crack and have a look at at the end of the year and see what's worked well and what hasn't worked well. But it's something to base on. So we've talked about a couple of ways that boards can positively do this. And of course, all boards are perfect. So they will always only have a positive impact on the teams that they work with and the organisations that they lead. Does it sometimes happen that boards maybe don't do as well as they could and possibly have a negative impact in terms of psychosocial hazards? What's your view there?

Leanne Hart 16:46

Look, I have seen spectrum of that. And certainly when the board don't fully understand the day to day experience of the CEO or of a staff member, I've seen quite a negative impact on the well being of somebody. And I think it's getting to understand whether the expectations of the staff members are fair and informed. And one particular example that springs to mind is a CEO that had bereaved a family member very, very recently. And during the board meeting, she had managed to get herself to a board meeting because it was a fairly important discussion that we're about to have. But you know, recently sent bereaving, a family member, she wasn't in the greatest headspace to be able to have those conversations. And one of the board members really went to task on some financial information that had been missed on our report, that board member was aware of her situation and showed no mercy. And it was a very, very uncomfortable position for everybody on the board for the person involved whose was going through a very tough time emotionally and with mental health issues resulting from that bereavement. I mean, the board member chose to pursue something that yes, it was important. But the conversation had a really detrimental impact on the staff member. And that relationship never recovered. And went on to be quite a damaged and fractured situation, which didn't help anybody else on the board. And it certainly damaged that relationship with somebody who was trying to lead an organisation and do really great things in the community.

Helga Svendsen 18:21

So I'm wondering, in as much detail as you were able to share, if that person if that board member was the chair of the board, and if they weren't the chair of the board, what was the dynamic there and whether the chair, like I think I heard other board members were uncomfortable, just how that played out a bit.

Leanne Hart 18:37

That person was not the chair. But one of the things that I did observe was that none of the other board members really spoke up about it, not in front of the staff member. So nobody was jumping in to support the staff member at the time, it was lots of people thinking have lots of people with really good intentions, but very little proactive action being taken. And I think that was just as detrimental as that one person's impact. So as a result, that staff member didn't feel supported from the whole board. The chair was not able to confront that behaviour, either. There was a strong level of discomfort there. And yeah, I think it just led to a very complicated board relationship from that point onwards. And so that impacts everybody that impacts the chair and impacts the staff member and impacted all the other people on the board as well. They're speaking up and ally, regardless of if it's another board member or the staff member is super important for setting a good example of well being an organisational culture of well being calling out bad.

Helga Svendsen 19:45

Yeah, whatever it may be, you know, the standard we walk past is the standard way except I'm wondering because my pumped is one or both of those people left the organisation, the CEO and or the board member and or potentially some other board members who left First, correct? Yeah. And did the CEO leave before the board members or vice versa?

Leanne Hart 20:06

The chair left before the CEO and any other board member? Yes.

Helga Svendsen 20:12

And that's often what happens in these, isn't it? People move on because they've lost confidence and move on. Like, I don't know how long ago this was, if it was 10 years ago, of course, They've all moved on. But my pumped is someone or someone's moved on relatively soon after those sorts of events. So it's important, and the behaviour in the boardroom, we talk about the tone from the top, and the fish rots from the head, and all of those sorts of things. But they have a real impact on individuals, and the organisation, the organisation that we're all trying to lead in a positive way. So yeah, it's a good story for us to keep in mind, we can have in the boardroom a positive impact or a negative impact. And if we witness a negative impact, speak up.

Leanne Hart 20:51

When it comes to well being, you're taking the time to understand the situation of a staff member before you jump in and make assumptions or make accusations. Think about how thoughtfully you

could have that discussion. Is it something that could be had one on one with the person as opposed to in a group environment, there's a conflict look at? Well, if you were the person that was having a disagreement, would you want that to be aired in front of everybody? Or would you be feel like it was more appropriate for that to happen in a one on one situation? So I think board members just being a little thoughtful around if that was them in their same situation? How would they like to be treated? And what would land best for everybody, and the well being of other board members as well, if you're somebody who's conflict averse, or is not used to working in environments and not very harmonious that could put off other board members from ever wanting to join a board again, or tarnish, the ability to be able to recruit new members is a risk to their reputation. So when we think about well being as a just the people working there, but I think it's equally applicable to boards to look out for their own, but to be responsible for the well being of others, too.

Helga Svendsen 22:04

So board members in thinking about psychosocial hazards, should have a zero tolerance for them. Is that right?

Leanne Hart 22:12

Sarah? tolerance of things like bullying and harassment, violence and aggression, discrimination. So certain things Absolutely. A zero tolerance policy should be in place and lovely to see policies that go with that as well. It sets the bar for what's acceptable and what's not, as long as everybody from board down through to volunteers are working towards that same zero tolerance, there's not one rule for one group and one rule for another. So I think there's, there's a very good thing when it's a zero tolerance around it, where it's a bad thing is where others are not calling it out. So if there's different behaviours accepted in different environments, then zero tolerance. People see that and think, Well, I'm not seeing zero tolerance being modelled in every situation here. And that's when you get disparities and inequity, which is another. Another one of the psychosocial hazards is organisational justice, when people are seeing different treatment for different people in different situations, that's when it can cause additional conflict. And if people are seeing that behaviour over and over, then that can mess with their mental health as well.

Helga Svendsen 23:21

Oh, yeah. And so much good stuff in here for boards to think about in you know, in their practice around this. So what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Leanne Hart 23:33

I think firstly, knowing their obligations to safeguard the well being of everyone that works and volunteers there, including themselves and other board members, getting on the front foot with psychosocial hazards, so doing a risk assessment, understanding from your staff and volunteers, what are the psychosocial hazards are real risks, what they're experiencing, and what can be done to mitigate that get people involved in the problem solving as well as the identification, put wellbeing on the agenda at board meetings have a well being strategy as simple or as complicated as you have capacity to deal with and start a conversation with the CEO about wellbeing, there's and the well being of others in the team?

Helga Svendsen 24:15

Well, I think as we said before, just start, start where you are and start with something and get something in place around some of it. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Leanne Hart 24:25

Yeah, there is a free hub called The Community Well, and The Community Well is the social sector, wellbeing and resilience hub, which has a mountain of free resources in there for the social sector. So I'd really encourage people to jump on and have a look at that, that one in particular or two in particular, that we will include a wellbeing governance guide, and a board reporting checklist. And they include items that the CEO can include in their board reporting and discussions so that it just prompts the right sort of discussions during board meetings. And a governance guide is just a few things the boards may or may not have thought about in the wellbeing space.

Helga Svendsen 25:03

Oh my god, fantastic. I might share those resources in the Take on Board Facebook group as well in anticipation of this episode coming up because they, the sorts of conversations boards need to be having.

Leanne Hart 25:03

If people haven't checked out the community well, I'd really encourage you to do that. There's other free resources on there, including an organisational health check, checklists, templates and advocacy tools as well that boards might find useful.

Helga Svendsen 25:26

Oh, fantastic. That's what we like a well of information about wellness. Oh, anyway. Oh, Leanne. Thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your wisdom about this book, The Take on Board community. I know people will take a lot away from this and hopefully have boards and organisations that are really championing this even more. So, thank you for taking the time today.

Leanne Hart 25:52

My absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

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