

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 189

Transcript – Lesley Antoun



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Lesley Antoun about strategy, strategic decision making and board dynamics. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this podcast today. For me, that's the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters and culture, and I acknowledged that this land was never seated. Personally, 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 Lesley. Lesley is on the boards of Jacques Cartier and Champlain Bridges Incorporated, Wainbee Ltd, the Canadian Real Estate Association and Concordia University Alumni Association. She was previously on the boards of Literacy Unlimited. Lesley is a successful executive, leadership coach, consultant and speaker with over 25 years of experience in strategic planning, program and risk management, partnership development and stakeholder management with multinationals, private corporations governments, First Nations organisations and nonprofits. Her expertise has benefited organisations in various industries including infrastructure, passenger rail, aerospace and manufacturing. Lesley is also an active member of several professional associations, including the Institute of Corporate Directors and women Corporate Directors. Her contributions include numerous speaking and writing engagements, while serving on the Equity Diversity and Inclusion committee of one not for profit board and chairing the Human Resources Committee of the board of a small privately held company. She authored an article for the National Association of Corporate Directors, which for those of you in Australia who are listening, it's kind of like our AICD. What's the AICD is the Australian chapter. So yeah, she authored an article on diversity and inclusion in the boardroom, drawing on her past experiences as a new board member, as well as on research into that topic. She's fluently bilingual. She holds a mechanical engineering degree, and an MBA from McGill University. In 2022, she was named one of the Concordia University top 50, under 50 shaping tomorrow. With that introduction, welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Lesley,

Lesley Antoun 2:23

Thank you so much Helga. So I'd like to let you know that I'm coming to you today from my home in what's now known as Montreal, which is unseeded indigenous territory, the Tiohtià:ke nation is recognized as the custodians of the land on which I live. And of the waters, of course, that surround the Island of Montreal. So Tiohtià:ke is historically known as the gathering place for many First Nations. And today, of course, it's home to a diverse population of many indigenous peoples and

other peoples as well. So I acknowledge and I recognize the continued connections with the past, the present and the future. Thank you for having me on your podcast.

Helga Svendsen 3:04

Oh, fabulous. Thank you. And I'm interested actually, in Australia, it's reasonably common for us to start meetings and gatherings with an acknowledgement of country if it's a significant event, it may be a welcome to country by a First Nations person tell me in Canada is is doing an acknowledgement like that, is that common?

Lesley Antoun 3:23

It's becoming more common among institutions, government organisations, certainly universities, but it's not as common as what I like to see. You know, of course, the acknowledgment needs to be sincere, and it needs to be followed through with some action. So I don't think we're, we're where we need to be, in order to honor the recommendations that were put forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That's my personal opinion.

Helga Svendsen 3:55

Yeah, right. Okay. Interesting. It's, I think, probably in the last five to 10 years, it's become much more common outside the big institutional places. So every board meeting that I now go to is started with an acknowledgement of country, for example, it's becoming more and more common, but you're right, it can't just be oh, let me do an acknowledgement and then charge on with doing all of what we do, which is not honoring in the slightest. So there needs to be that, that consistency in there. So, okay, that's good to know. Thank you. Right. So before we talk about strategy, strategic decision making and board dynamics, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me about your upbringing, and what lessons you learned, what you've got up to and the leading influences on how you thought and what you did.

Lesley Antoun 4:46

Sure. Well, I'm a second generation Canadian and my parents came to this country in the late 60s, and I was born here in Canada, and my parents were very poor. Hard working folks, like so many people who leave everything they have behind and come to new land, they left Egypt with almost nothing. And they came here built a new life for themselves. They were both teachers. So from them, I learned hard work and diligence and learned integrity. Growing up, I remember just being a very happy child, spending a lot of time with my parents, they had a lot of free time compared to what it seems like we have now. So I really cherish those those moments growing up. One defining moment for me in my upbringing was when my father passed away suddenly, when I was 13, and then my mother raised myself and my sister through our teenage years, and you know, to become

adults, but I remember that, I remember how strong she was in raising us on her own, obviously, unexpected event. And I remember how she dealt with it with grace. And with such strength and independence,

Helga Svendsen 5:58

Oh, you know, I cannot imagine just going into your teenage years, which are already so challenging in terms of life and influences, and hormones and all of that sort of thing. Yes. Yes. So what are your mum sounds amazing.

Lesley Antoun 6:16

As she Yes, she was. And, you know, one of the things that was drilled into me from a very young age, because of that situation that we were in, you know, she was raising us as a widow was that we as girls, my sister, and I needed to be able to provide for ourselves, no matter what we needed to find our own voice speak for ourselves, we needed to make our own path and and education was central to that it was really a quite a defining moment in so many different ways.

Helga Svendsen 6:49

And so many things I've heard in there about, you know, diligence, integrity and hard work and finding your voice and finding your own path. All amazing attributes for the boardroom. So in some ways, yes. Perhaps not at all surprising. And with your, your strong mum as that role model for you as well. Yes. So yes, you know, there's a whole lot of pointers in there, which probably at the time, I can't imagine as a 13 year old, you went, Oh, I know, I'm going to end up in the boardroom doing this.

Lesley Antoun 7:17

No, no, certainly not. I mean, you live through it, you go through it, and you do the best you can. I remember one of the things that I did, shortly after my father passed away, probably a few months later was I joined the Army Cadets. And imagine for, you know, in the 1980s, right, a 13 year old girl joining the Army Cadets was not that common, and especially for for a family that had come over from from Egypt. It was not, it was very unusual. And that experience gave me a whole new dimension. You know, as a person gave me a whole new dimension. I learned about organisational dynamics, I learned about hierarchy. I learned about power, I learned about politics, I learned about so many things that so many 13 year old at the time, nevermind 13 year old girls in the 80s didn't have any kind of exposure to

Helga Svendsen 8:10

Yeah, wow. Also a fabulous. Well, I'm guessing there are some highs and lows in that when you're learning about power and politics. There's always highs and lows. But learning some of those things, sadly, great lessons for the boardroom.

Lesley Antoun 8:27

They're really hard. They're really hard. They have been formative for my entire career, to be honest with you.

Helga Svendsen 8:32

Yeah. So let's then turn to your experience in the boardroom and your wisdom around strategy, strategic decision making and board dynamics. Where should we start? In terms of strategy? How do you think about strategy? And how should boards think about strategy?

Lesley Antoun 8:50

It's a really great question. I'm a career strategic planner, pretty much. Of course, I'm a mechanical engineer by trade, I worked as an engineer for five years. And then I, as I did my MBA, I started my career in strategy. So kind of pivoted in that sense, but always working for companies that were very technical in nature, in terms of their products, and so on. So the engineering degree came in handy. The strategy capabilities developed not only because of my MBA, but also just on the job, right? So you work for so many years in strategy and strategic planning, you learn a thing or two, you learn that the theory you learned at school is maybe not that applicable in real life or needs to be tweaked. So and then through my career, I moved to some business development roles and program management roles, but really, I'm a strategist at heart. So even to the business development role into the program management roles. I brought a strategic mindset and I think that was very much appreciated at the level at which I was working. Now, you mirror that with strategy that's required around the boardroom table and it's completely different. It's completely different because the strategy around the boardroom table The board of directors is not responsible for creating strategy. They're responsible for challenging the management team on the strategy that is developed, making sure that all the stones are turned making sure that management is asking the right questions is giving itself optionality is looking at various scenarios, and so on. So the board is responsible for overseeing all of that, but not doing it. So right, there is a difference for me. So when I jumped onto my first board, which was a nonprofit, with not that many staff, there was nobody to do strategy. So I kind of I was able to prepare the strategy and work with the various stakeholders to do the strategy ourselves. But that's not a typical board director role. What a typical role is about it's more about challenging management and overseeing the strategy making sure that it's the right strategy.

Helga Svendsen 10:53

Absolutely. And I've also been involved in some not for profit boards. And sometimes when you're on a not for profit board, or indeed, on any smaller organisation board, whether it's not for profit or for profit, because I think often the smaller startup organisations, and so the boards will be much more hands on. And they're almost like volunteers in the organisation rather than a pure gov. And you just need to know when you're changing hats.

Lesley Antoun 11:18

Yes, that's absolutely true. I see that also, with some of the smaller organisations that I work with, the roles can be a little fluid. And the trick is knowing when am I taking my board director hat off? Because with the role of board director, I mean, there's a fiduciary duty, right, and there's the governance responsibility. There's an intersection between governance and strategy that the board director is responsible for. And it's hard to properly manage that intersection if you're up to your elbows in data, because you're doing the strategy.

Helga Svendsen 11:57

Absolutely. So keeping that kind of bird's eye view helicopter view, however, we want to frame it view is absolutely vital, even if you're getting into the weeds. I'm interested a moment ago, you talked about, I think you said the board is not creating the strategic direction, but they are challenging management on the strategic direction. I'm interested in delving into that a little deeper, because I think, I mean, I've described it this way, often the board's responsible for setting the strategic direction and the the organisation does it. So I was really interested to hear in there that the board's role is to challenge management about their strategic direction, rather than set the strategic direction. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Lesley Antoun 12:40

That's a great question Helga, I think the board does have some role to play in setting the strategic direction in the sense of saying, we as a board collectively would like you to explore this or explore that. And we as a board, believe the organisation needs to move very aggressively towards setting some ESG targets, for example, okay. But at the end of the day, the choosing of the strategic direction, it needs to be with management, because management is responsible for executing. So if we as a board agree that the strategic direction needs to be in ESG, but management is basically treading water, or having some key structural issues that it will take them maybe a year or two years to get out from under, you know, it's good for them to know that the board is aiming for that strategic direction, but likely, they're not going to be able to pursue it for the time being they need to pursue something that's true to what their skills and capabilities are. The other option is, of course, the board can choose to replace the CEO with someone who is going to execute on whatever strategic direction they want to undertake. And I know that that's been done in many cases. But in most cases, I think that the board has a responsibility to identify a strategic direction, and then

management has the responsibility to develop it and pursue it to the extent of their capabilities or to provide alternatives.

Helga Svendsen 14:15

Yep. No, that makes sense. I think that's, yeah, I mean, you do hope, of course, that they're treading the same line in a way or the same direction in a, you know, in a robust way, not just in our Oh, yes, we will think the same. This is awesome. But in a you know, testing each other challenging each other, but you do hope they're heading in the same direction. And you're right, if they're not Well, someone needs to go if that's the case. So, which probably brings us to Boardroom dynamics or Dynamics more broadly, yes. So to develop strategy to implement strategy to ensure that it is robustly challenged constructively. In fact, not just strategy, almost everything comes down to Boardroom dynamic. Thanks. So, tell me what, particularly from the strategy lens, what's important in terms of those boardroom dynamics?

Lesley Antoun 15:07

I think open discussion is the most important thing. I know many people would say alignment. And I disagree. I think I mean, at the end of the day, if the board has to vote on something, of course, alignment, you need a majority. I mean, that's just how the mechanics work. But I think that the most important thing is open discussion. I've been part of boards, and I've worked with boards where there's a glaring misalignment, glaring, with respect to strategy or strategic direction or questions on even questions that could seem black and white on governance type questions. At the end of the day, what what is so important to me, and why I decided to keep working with these words is because they clearly value open dialog and sharing of viewpoints. And then at the end of the process, and the discussions, then there's a vote and some people will agree, some people disagree. And so then you move forward. But that discussion for me is it's a it's a non starter having a board where everybody's just sort of nodding, yes. Agreeing with each other is for me, it's a non starter.

Helga Svendsen 16:18

Yeah. Yeah.

Lesley Antoun 16:21

I actually think that's, that's, that's an indication of very poor boardroom dynamics.

Helga Svendsen 16:26

I could not agree more. It's those robust conversations. So what do you need in the boardroom to have those robust conversations? Because they can be difficult, you know, people are, it's, it's so much easier to have groupthink, you know, you will walk out of the room. Oh, nailed it. What needs to happen for those open discussions for those robust conversations to happen constructively? How does that magic happen?

Lesley Antoun 16:53

I think part of it, a lot of it has to do with who's leading the boardroom table, who's so who the chairperson is and what their attitude is and what their approach is. And then, of course, I think the CEO has a big part of it as well, in most cases, I've worked with boards who have the CEO, whether it's as an a voting member, or a non voting member, but the CEO definitely has a very strong voice. And where magic happens is when Eagle leaves the room. And so these two individuals can come together, understanding each of their roles. And understanding that, in a sense, they sit on opposite sides of the table, they are hopefully having the same vision for the organisation, and they have the organisation's best interests at heart. But hopefully, they have some diverging views on specifics of that vision, how that vision will be carried out, and then can challenge each other. You know, of course, the CEO sees the day to day, she sees the operational reality she's face forward with the clients and the stakeholders. And the chairperson has her own lived experience, and has her own knowledge base, which can add a lot of value and it can be a little, it can seem like friction, it can seem like, like an adversarial relationship, but I really look for a chairman and a CEO that can challenge each other in a respectful fashion.

Helga Svendsen 18:24

Yeah, it is. It's, it's like the secret ingredient almost to make those conversations really constructive and fruitful. Um, switching gears slightly, you've been involved in the governance of an honor worked alongside a number of First Nations, organisations and people in Canada. And I'm just wondering, in your experience, what the differences or similarities might be both around strategy and boardroom dynamics, in terms of those organisations and working with First Nations people, what are your reflections there?

Lesley Antoun 18:56

Well, you know, I wouldn't be able to generalize, of course, I can only speak to the specific experiences that I've had. What I found is that, in all cases, strategy development comes down to people and to their aspirations for their organisation. There's nobody that shows up that I've seen around the boardroom table and wants to do a poor job or wants to set a bad strategic direction. Everybody goes in wanting to do the best that they can and make the best decisions. And so sometimes discussions get heated, whether it's when working with First Nations organisations or

otherwise, sometimes discussions get heated. What I realized is that there's this fundamental thread this common thread, it doesn't matter what group of people you're working with. People honestly care about the organisation that they're working for. Nobody shows up with bad intentions. So that's the first thing. The second thing I realized, early on when I was first invited to work with an organisation on the Mohawk First Nation of Ghana, lagi, you know, I had to educate myself. And I encourage everybody that I come into contact with who has the opportunity to work with any member of a First Nation, to educate themselves on the history of First Nations communities, it's so important to walk in having at least some basic education, you'll never have an understanding, but at least some basic education of what our history looks like. And it's our, it's our joint history. We underestimate the importance of listening. I was speaking with one CEO that I'm working with, she's an incredible leader. And she interacts with the same Mohawk First Nation regularly. And she said to me, you know, it's, I don't understand what the problem is, I walk in, and I'm just, I'm listening, I'm here to listen. So we underestimate listening as a tool, a really powerful tool for finding common ground. So those are the three things I would focus on, you know, there's a common thread, everybody wants to do a good job, you need to be educated, you need to educate yourself and listening in you need to listen.

Helga Svendsen 21:33

Absolutely, which is really all good traits for any board director to have no matter what organisation you're involved in. And even the listening side there. I mean, you talked before about strategy and the role of the board in challenging, sometimes inverted commas just listening, because listening is of course, not just listening, but listening, deeply listening. And deeply listening to perhaps management of the organisation, talk through strategies sometimes can be enough, as they talk through as they verbalize what's happening. And as you create that space to deeply listen and listen to understand that might be enough for those productive, constructive, robust conversations around strategy and strategic direction.

Lesley Antoun 22:16

That's absolutely true. And I wanted to touch on that aspect of robustness. Whenever I'm sitting around the board table, whenever we're running my own strategy mandates, it's a non starter. And when I'm sitting around the board table, I always ask who was included in your strategy development process? I always ask that. For me, that's one of the indications of the stickiness the future stickiness of that strategy and that strategic plan, the narrower the inclusion, then, you know, conversely, the broader the exclusion, the narrower the inclusion, the less chance that strategy has of actually being executed. There's been lots of talk over the past 20 years about execution, there have been books written about it, you know, the importance of execution, execution is super important. But if you're executing the wrong strategy, you're just driving faster towards a brick wall. Oh, it's such a beautiful way of putting it. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And it's true. So to me, the frontline people have the greatest visibility on what's going right, what's going wrong. And sometimes they also have some very diverse life experience, which opens up windows and doors to your strategy

Helga Svendsen 23:34

Absolute. And I would say also, looking at frontline, broadly, depending on what sort of organisation it is, your frontline might not be your staff. They might be your customers, your consumers.

Lesley Antoun 23:44

Absolutely. Partners. Yes, I did a, I did a I think it was a webinar a couple of years ago, maybe on ecosystem strategy. And it was about an hour and a half long, we had about 20 or 30 people from across the nation. And it was about developing a strategy as an organisation. Well, first of all, if you develop your strategy, just with your leadership team, you know, it's this narrow. If you develop it with your organisation, it opens up if you start developing a common strategy with your suppliers and with your customers. Now, all of a sudden, your vision is so much broader if you create capacity in your organisation and in other people's organisations for the execution of that strategy simply by including them.

Helga Svendsen 24:30

Yes, absolutely. Oh, these conversations always go too quickly. So, you know, we've talked about strategy and strategy development and inclusion and boardroom dynamics. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Lesley Antoun 24:48

There is a role for the board, a very important role and there's also a very important role for management when it comes to strategy development. Inclusion is key to Good development strategy. Listening is key to understanding truly understanding what's going on and being able to develop great strategy.

Helga Svendsen 25:11

Fantastic. Some great lessons there. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Lesley Antoun 25:20

There's a few, you know, I, I think I would like to share the ecosystem strategy, I posted the videos on my website. So those can be found at lesleyantoun.com And I'll send you the link. I've also written an article with the National Association of Corporate Directors about effective onboarding

practices effective in the sense of being inclusive, you know, there's a big push has yet to be more inclusive at the boardroom, around the boardroom table, which is great, which is absolutely great. But what's not great is pushing for that inclusion and bringing somebody on from typically underrepresented community, and having processes or language or behaviors or approaches which are offensive, or insulting to that person who is one around the table. And it's very, very, very difficult to speak up when you're the only one who is different, and you're new, and you've just been brought on board. So the article I wrote within NACD, or for NACD is about how a board can prepare to welcome truly welcome a board member from an underrepresented community, especially if they haven't typically included that that community, I'll tell you, I was invited to be on the board of an organisation, which is a very in a very male dominated field, and had only ever been run by men, both at the management level and at the board level. You know, being a mechanical engineer and being having the skill set that I had, I was qualified for the role. And I was I was offered it. The experience of getting onto that board reinforced my view that there is inherent bias and the welcoming environment needs to be created. It doesn't just happen just because you brought this person on board.

Helga Svendsen 27:25

Absolutely. I think in some ways that hooks back to our listening and deeply listening and deeply listening to understand and checking some of those things. I would Yeah, great. Send me the link to that we will make sure a link to that is in the show notes because that sounds like there's some excellent wisdom in there as well. Oh, thank you so much for taking the time to have this discussion today and for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community. I know there is a lot that people will take from this. So thank you for being here with us today.

Lesley Antoun 27:53

Thank you, and have a wonderful rest of the day.

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