

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 238



Transcript – Take on Board Breakfast: Liz Cosson responds to questions from the Take on Board community.

Helga Svendsen 0:02

Welcome back, folks. I can tell from the questions that are coming through that you've had some pretty amazing conversations in those breakout rooms. So I will go through the questions in the order that they come. I'm going to ask people to ask their own questions. If you can say your name, and where you're from, whether that's your board or your day job, or both, whichever you prefer. That would be great. So you get to ask your own questions. So Alex, Alex Cuthbertson, you've got the first question here. Where are you Alex, if you want to take yourself off mute, there you go. Introduce yourself and ask your question.

Alex Cuthbertson 0:38

Hi, everyone. I'm Alex Cuthbertson. My question was during Liz's discussion, she referred to the her limitations. And we all actually acknowledged that we all have limitations. And I'm sort of probably at a similar part of my board journey as Elizabeth, I'm still looking for my first board. And I think sometimes we focus too much on our limitations and let our limitations define what we're capable of achieving. So I'm interested Liz, whether there was anything in particular that you've done or continuing to do to sort of overcome that and make sure that your limitations aren't defining what you're actually capable of achieving?

Liz Cosson 1:17

Thanks, Alex. Yeah, I'm so certainly, I know, we can often fall into that. Of I know, I can't do this, I can't do that. But that's why when I was teasing out a before going onto the board, I thought, This is what I can do. This is what I can bring to the board. And I know one of my biggest limitations is I'm not financially literate, I know that I need to look at the financial aspects of a not for profit board, in completely different eyes. What I used to look at my financial statements sitting in a Commonwealth department is very different. And I've just been speaking to my colleagues on the board. And I spoke with the CFO of the organisation and said, How can you help me? What should I read that you think,

is a good way to get across this that is for someone who is not financially literate, and the CFO was wonderful. And he pointed me in a direction to understand the aged care, funding models and all that type of thing. But just to sit down with another one of the board, she is just beautiful human. And she said to me, I'll sit with you, Liz, she chairs the audit and risk committee. So she said, I'll show you what you need to know these sorts of things. And not being afraid to acknowledge that I haven't got strength in that area. And if I do ask a stupid question, I'm actually asking it one on one with someone so that I don't feel so nervous raising it in the board. The other day, I did something similar. I rang one of the other board members who I knew had so much experience on this board, and I said, Can you help me understand this particular aspect of what we're looking at? He said, Yeah, mate, no problem. And he just told me the history and put it all in the context. So it's not being afraid. And just building those relationships, Alex, and it doesn't need to be on that board that you're on. Or it could be on another board like this, this connection, this community where you make a friend and you say, Oh, you've got heaps of experience on boards, can you help me in this particular area? I hope that helps.

Helga Svendsen 3:20

Thank you. Thanks, Liz. If I can just add to that it's about what I'm hearing from you is that sometimes that deficit, I'm not going to really, I'm a strengths based person. So I find it hard to do that. But for example, in finance, asking the stupid question can be of huge value. So it's recognizing that that different perspective and that sometimes that lack of deep knowledge is actually a value as well, particularly in the boardroom. Beautiful. Kirsten, Kirsten, where are you? You're up next, if you could, there you are. Thank you, if you could briefly introduce yourself and ask your question.

Kirstin Coote 3:53

Thanks. My name is Kirstin Coote, I work in the public sector. So it was really interesting hearing Liz talk about that particular sector. I'm really interested to find out more about dealing with a situation where the leadership has been different to what you expected. So this is where sometimes the experiences people talk, a great talk, but don't follow the walk and how you may have dealt with that kind of situation.

Liz Cosson 4:21

Yeah, and it's hard, because I know and I, I'll be careful, because I don't want to mention the organisation. But I was in a Commonwealth department. And a new leader came in new leadership, an enormous clash of values for me, and I struggled, and I spoke to a mentor, and I said, Look, I just don't want to go to work anymore. And you know, after 30 something years, that's not a good place to be. And the mentor for me, gave me a book, and it was called a clash of values. And I read the book, and I'll try and get that To Helier or Lisa to be able to give you the link to it, but a clash of values and just looking at yourself again and say, Well, what's important to me? What's my life's purpose? Why am I going to work? It's not to undermine my values, it's actually to make a

contribution. And I chose to leave, I left well, and that's another life lesson for me leave well, I spoke with the boss and said, I think I need to find somewhere else to go. I didn't say it's because our values clash. I just need to find another opportunity. I think, you know, I just want to expand my understanding of his field. And I told him where I wanted to go. And he helped me. And I left well. And I've watched now that organisation, and my goodness me, I'm glad I didn't stay there. That's all I'll say. And I went on to have a very happy career after that. So, um, but it's just recognizing it and recognizing what's important to you. What gets you up in the morning?

Helga Svendsen 6:05

Nikki, you've got the next question. Where are you? On my screen? Oh, there you are. Thank you. Okay, if you could introduce yourself and ask your question.

Nikki Patten 6:16

Liz, thank you first, for just such a compelling address this morning, I just found that I was hanging on your every word. And just to have your combination of humility and strength and incredible experience just yeah, really, quite affected me this morning. I've worked in nonprofit now for about 20 years being on medical charity board and better start on education board. And my question is around what we saw coming out of the Army, and particularly David Morrison's stance on standards, and the famous phrase, which is now often quoted in business circles, non for profit circles, and everywhere, the standard you will pass is the standard you accept. It occurred to me that you probably had a ringside seat to when that one was all playing out. And I'd be just be very interested to know, have you seen cultural change? Have you seen the sort of the widespread change that we all felt was, was really cool four out of that time.

Liz Cosson 7:22

Oh thanks Nikki, I'm good friend of David's, and it was a very powerful and very timely, a speech that he gave about behaviors and values, and they changed the Army values, actually, at that time, as well. And put respect was always carried initiative and teamwork as the three core values. And they added respect as their fourth value, which was a really powerful message, culture. And culture change takes a long time. And the challenge is that culture can actually flip back, unless you're paying attention to it. And I've, I've had firsthand experience where I've seen the efforts to drive a cultural change. And it needs the commitment of all of the leadership team. And it needs the commitment at every level. And it is hard. Some people use the word culture as if it's, you know, something really easy to change. Well, it's not I tried that in the Department of Veterans Affairs, change the culture, it's not easy. And as I say, culture can eat strategy for breakfast, I see really good efforts in defense to change the culture. I've seen some improvement. But I'm also a keen observer of the Royal Commission into defense and veteran suicide. That's still underway. And I've given evidence before that Royal Commission. And I still believe there is more that needs to be done in relation to the culture in defense. Nice way to put it.

Helga Svendsen 9:01

Emma, you're up next. You've got two questions in here, one about values and one about identity. Introduce yourself and ask either or both of those questions as you see fit.

Emma Bennison 9:11

Thanks, Helga and Liz, thank you for your talk. It was really great to hear. Yeah, I think we did cover the values one before. So your point about titles being transient, and the fact that you don't hold on to them, and that you need to have a clear identity really resonated with some of us. And so just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you've made those transitions when you've relinquished a title. And what you found has helped you to make those transitions.

Liz Cosson 9:41

Thanks, Emma. And it sort of goes back I think to Alex's point as well. It's when you going into a new role and you need to leave behind where you've been and I'll use that example when no longer in a uniform in a suit, walking into a meeting room where And when you're in a uniform, everyone's Silence, silence because they know who you are. They see your uniform, they know that you're the person because your nametag on and all that type of thing. And then you walk into a meeting room in a new organisation that don't understand or have any experience with where you've come from who you are. What's really important is you leave your reservations behind you your your view of your limitations, you have to know your subject matter. And you when you walk into the room, you have to know who you are, why you're there, and what you're bringing into that room. And how often have you gone into meetings where the chair hasn't taken control? And then you'll never achieve anything? So I've had the great privilege to chair many meetings. And I don't go in unprepared. I know my limitations. Yes, absolutely. But I never walk in unprepared. And I've never allowed people to try and take control over me, if you know what I mean. So just being prepared going in owning the room. And someone once said that, to me own your own space. Don't let others come into your space, it's yours. So your lease costs and you own your space, you take control. But you'll soon get found out if you actually haven't done your homework, that, you know, I can sit in that room as the chair and I can acknowledge I don't know everything. I don't know all the answers. And I leave it to the discussion to learn from there. But ultimately, as the Chair, I'll make the decision on particular topics. So I had to learn that confidence in myself and get over that fear of not knowing everything. I don't know everything. I can't know everything. But I'm not, not the subject matter of everything. There are others in the room that are going to be able to contribute. I just need to make sure I tease that out. And I learned from them.

Helga Svendsen 12:00

Oh, I'm going to squeeze one more in and then we'll do the others afterwards. So Leeanne, you're up next, if you could introduce yourself and ask your question.

Leeanne Darmanin 12:08

Thank you, Liz, just this, thank you so much for sharing your amazing journey. That was just really quite fascinating. You talked a little bit about connections, and how connections are so important. And to use your networks wisely. I was just wondering if you'd be able to kindly share? What does use your networks wisely look like for you?

Liz Cosson 12:35

Thanks, Leeanne. My career has been based on networks and building networks and knowing who's in your network and what they bring to help you as well. And how you can help them. So it's two way and I always am available. If someone in my network just needs to tap into my experience or have a question for me to be available to them is really important. But then to be able to call them if I need their advice or a favor. And if I can just use the example of someone who I used to work with needed assistance in finding a new job needed to move and to be able to call someone up and say, Look, I haven't done this before. I don't don't take advantage of that network. And I said, I really need this person to find another job. They're really struggling. Can you help? And so I've used it wisely. I haven't gone there with everybody just saying, you know, I've got all these people that need your help, can you take them into your department, you can't do that, when to call in a favor, and when to return a favor is really important and what certainly during my military career, I looked at not only mentors, my network of colleagues, but also champions, people who are there like so Angus Houston, I don't know whether any of you've heard of him, but he's a wonderful human being who often coined the phrase, he was a values based leader in our Australian Defence Force, and he was the Chief of Defence Force. I know not just to call on Him for everything as a referee, you know, his name looks good on a CV, but I'm not gonna do that to him. He didn't do it. But I'm not going to do that. And he was a champion for me over over my career, military career. So it's just balancing it all. I think Leanne is really important and not taking advantage.

Helga Svendsen 14:28

So Liz, the first one is from Alex Patterson. And she asks, was there any particular framework or reflection that helped you understand your values that you talked about as being so key to you? What are your thoughts there?

Liz Cosson 14:40

Oh, it was quite a few years ago Helga where I learned the importance and my values when I made an enormous mistake in my military service. And it was quite public, brought into question the reputation of our Australian Defence Force. It had had an enormous impact on a lot of people. And I recall the moment I recognisid that I'd made the mistake, you know that I talked about fear or flight, there was no question that I was going to have flight that I had to own up straightaway. But anybody that when they face a mistake, they can sometimes feel ill. And I just remembered my mother's

voice in my ear, about taking the last cookie out of the cookie jar type of thing and blaming my brother and being into all heaps of trouble for trying to blame my brother. And that value set just kicked in and I knew it, I knew I had to own up, I knew I had to face what ever was going to happen. But importantly, I also knew that I needed the courage to continue the work that I was doing when I made that mistake. And I needed to deliver and the leader of the Defence Force at the time, wonderful leader who said to me, okay, we now know what's happened. And what we now do is deal with it. And you will be, you're required to finish the report that you're writing. So that's what you now need to focus on. And, you know, you learn your value set from that. And it was a real life lesson for me that that's how I can draw strength when I do face a challenge when I do face adversity. When I do face challenge, what is that telling you? And you can you can come up with your answers by just looking in at those core values that you have.

Helga Svendsen 16:39

So many beautiful lessons in there. So yeah, looking looking deep within, you'd reflected earlier in the response to one of the questions as well about how you always kind of encouraged people to come to you when something had gone wrong when they were failures. And I think what better, you know, showing people that that's okay is then leaning into it yourself. It's never fun. But leaning into that. Yeah. Nice.

Liz Cosson 17:04

Not being scared, not being scared and running away from it. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 17:09

I remember very early on in my career, one of my early bosses saying to me, she swore so I won't do that now. But she said, Look, Helga gonna mess up. Everyone messes up. Don't worry about that. Just let us know. Yeah. If that happened, anything can be fixed. Yeah. As long as you let us know, and it's a similar thing. Absolutely. Mickey asks a question here about you mentioned the balance of head and heart. How does that go? Does the heart always win?

Liz Cosson 17:40

No, no, no, it is about knowing the difference. And what the head brings to a problem solving environment and what the heart brings. I reflect on a time here in Canberra, when one of my jobs I was responsible for our military training area, just in Canberra. And we had a problem with kangaroos where there were just too many kangaroos for the training error. And they couldn't get out because we'd fenced it all in because of safety and security reasons. And I recall meeting with the CEO of the RSPCA, and also animal science experts about the kangaroo population out there, because we believed we needed to call the kangaroos. I'm an animal lover, I hate to think anything is

going to happen to an animal. The CEO of RSPCA is the same. I mean, he's in that job, because that's what drives him. But all of the sites that we were being presented, told us that they were suffering. And we had a number of protests telling us that we couldn't do it. But the head had to say we need to do this. Because the heart is saying we need to look after them. And to look after them. We need to call them. And it was hard, but it was understanding. And when he and I sat on a stage once a we were taking questions on the program. And we were both United that the science took us to where we needed to go. And it was the only thing we could have done. ,

Helga Svendsen 19:19

Oh that's so interesting in hearing that, Liz, because I also wonder whether the heart did win in a way. Because yeah. Yeah, in a different way. The science led you to this is the least suffering.

Liz Cosson 19:31

Yeah and it's that balance, isn't it earlier, it's saying, okay, pot head balance the two better outcome?

Helga Svendsen 19:39

Absolutely. Yeah. So it's interesting. I wonder if it's neither hot nor head winning. Both of them get a say and that's about Yeah, nice. Okay, yeah. And finally, you mentioned how determined you are has helped you along your journey. Where did you get that determination from that helped you get through the tough times?

Liz Cosson 19:58

It's my upbringing. In my childhood, that determination to succeed, but, you know, reading those school reports that I talked about where teachers would say, Oh, she needs to imply yourself more, she needs to concentrate more. And often, my brother was so clever Helga. I mean, he was an A student, proficient on the piano. He's proficient. He's a surgeon, a so clever. And I always felt that I needed to prove myself a little bit more of it. But determined, I'm so close to him, and just our childhood growing up together, we were determined, we had to be determined, we kept changing schools. We kept having to learn new things, new curriculums, and I remember going to school in us and coming back to school in Australia. Those things in the formative years are what make you who you are. And they made me determined, they may be determined, when I said to mum, that I wanted to join the army. They said, Well, they're not going to accept you. They said, You're not going to pass that training course. I wanted to prove to them that I could do it. I want to prove to myself I could do it. Yep. Determination. This just comes from within, doesn't it? You just want to...

Helga Svendsen 21:18

I wonder in hearing that, I wonder if your parents wanted you to be in the Army all along? And then they just said no, no, you can't do that leaves because there's nothing like being told you can't do something to make it really wanted.

Liz Cosson 21:28

It's true. Because I know at one point, I said to mum and dad, oh, I don't know whether I am going to make this year. And Mum turned to me and she said, Ah, your brother knew you wouldn't make it. Or you go.

Helga Svendsen 21:42

Yeah, or even a bit of healthy competition, or your brother would be able to do it. Oh, well, brother can do it, but I can't do. It's fascinating. Wonderful. All those beautiful lessons. And you know, I have no doubt that will stand you in good stead in this next part of the journey in the boardroom. So again, thank you so much for being with us today and for taking the time to answer the additional questions as well. We really appreciate it.

Liz Cosson 22:08

Thank you to you Connector in Chief.

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