# Graphical user interface, text Description automatically generatedTake on Board Podcast – Episode 244

Transcript – Ruhee Meghani

explains how to prioritise purpose-led leadership development and wellbeing

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Ruhee Meghani, about inclusion and wellbeing in the boardroom.

Before we start the recording 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 waters, skies and culture. I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 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 always was always will be Aboriginal land.

Now, let me tell you about Ruhee. Ruhee is on the Regional Advisory Council for the Victorian Multicultural Commission and she previously chaired the first Global South Asian Employee Resource Group for a major retail brand. Today Ruhee is the founder of Allied Collective Australia's first inclusive facilitation and wellbeing agency, that prioritizes purpose led leadership development through future focused training with over 12 years of experience across wellbeing retail advertising, sports management and hospitality, Ruhee is a thought leader in inclusive wellbeing, a yoga philosophy teacher and a public speaker. With an academic background in psychology and business management. She brings a unique perspective on how we live and work whilst balancing wellbeing. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast Ruhee.

Ruhi Meghani 1:31

Thank you so much for having me. It's an incredible honour. And can I just say such a heartfelt, genuine and deeply touching acknowledgement. So thank you for that.

Helga Svendsen 1:43

Thank you for being here. So Ruhee, and I met recently, just as the little meet and greet thing, and then before you know it, here she is on the podcast. So yay. At that first meeting, we talked about everything from Pilates to wellbeing and inclusion and you never know, we might end up doing the same today. But before we talk about inclusion, and wellbeing in the boardroom, as always, I'd love to dig just a little bit deeper about you. So tell me, Where were your parents born? And where are your ancestors from?

Ruhi Meghani 2:15

That's such a great question. So my parents were born in India, and my ancestors are also from India. And my grandmother was from Gujarat. So actually speak Marathi, which is my mother tongue from my grandmother's side. And it's an incredible honour to even reflect on where my ancestors were from. It's such an important part of who we are.

Helga Svendsen 2:37

So tell me where you where were you born? Where did you grow up? Tell me about the family unit.

Ruhi Meghani 2:42

Yeah. So I was born in the land of Bollywood, Mumbai. I was born and raised there and had an incredibly fulfilling and blessed upbringing in a town called Bandra in Mumbai, and I grew up with two older siblings. So I have a sister who is eight years older, she lives in Dubai. I have a brother who's four years older. And yeah, I moved to Australia about 11 years ago. And as any migrant has their unique journey. It's been such an interesting journey to navigate as an Indian born and now Australian, South Asian Muslim woman in Australia, and it couldn't have been a more fulfilling ride.

Helga Svendsen 3:25

Do you have other family here in Australia?

Ruhi Meghani 3:27

My husband is here. In terms of relatives, no one in Australia.

Helga Svendsen 3:33

You touched on the acknowledgement of country that we did at the start. We acknowledge the traditional owners of this country. How does that work in a country like India?

Ruhi Meghani 3:42

Yeah, that's such a great question. And India is home to one of the oldest known civilizations of the Indus Valley. And looking into Mumbai, in particular, one of the oldest settlers there were called the Koli's. And because it's a coastal town, it came from fishing and things like that. So it's incredible to even learn about the history of Mumbai as such, and how it moved from Bombay as a city to now Mumbai that we know.

Helga Svendsen 4:10

I'm always loath to ask this question, but I will, because I'm one of those Australians that only speaks English, but Ruhee how many languages do you speak?

Ruhi Meghani 4:19

So I actually didn't know this word as of recently, the word polyglot. So my thinking language is English, but I also speak Hindi, Gujarati, a little bit of Marathi and I studied French in high school, and I can also read a little bit of Arabic.

Helga Svendsen 4:38

Oh, my goodness. I loved how you said your thinking languages, English. What's your dreaming language? What are you dreaming?

Ruhi Meghani 4:45

My dreaming language would be a mix of all three. Because growing up in a very multilingual household, you would string together a sentence with Hindi, English and Gujarati. And now my husband who was born in Australia also picks up Hindi words that I say. And he kind of weaves them into English sentences. So it kind of has such a beautiful thing where you're able to intertwine culture and language into your everyday.

Helga Svendsen 5:14

Yes. Interesting. So it's like creating a whole new language all over again, that integration of all the different languages. Yeah. Oh, fabulous. And where do you feel your place or your home? Is?

Ruhi Meghani 5:25

That is such a beautiful question. And I think my original home will always be where I was born, where my roots are in Mumbai, and my home now, and the last decade or so has been Australia. And now Melbourne. And I feel most at home on the couch with my husband and our little beagle. His name was John. No, no, my husband, the beagle's name is John.

Helga Svendsen 5:52

What's your husband's name? The dogs.

Ruhi Meghani 5:55

My husband's name is Simon. So we have Simon and John.

Helga Svendsen 6:01

I was reading something the other day about the COVID pets and more of them have, you're more likely to hear John the dog than you are Rover, the dog or Spot the dog or whatever. They're much more human type names, as I understand.

Ruhi Meghani 6:15

Human names for pets is the new trend. Just ask John. Yeah. And then other times my home is my yoga mat or in nature.

Helga Svendsen 6:24

Oh, lovely. Thank you. Thanks for letting us delve around a little bit in there. And indeed, can we talking diversity and wellbeing in the boardroom, there might be a little bit more delving in there. So today, we're talking about inclusion, and wellbeing in the boardroom. I'm wondering if you were previously, as I said, at the top of the episode, you were the chair of the South Asian Employee Resource Group. I'm wondering what practices you had in place as the chair, because we often know that the chair has such an impact on these so what practices you had in place, as part of your chairing role that encouraged inclusion and wellbeing maybe we'll stop there.

Ruhi Meghani 7:01

Yeah and while in preparation for this episode, I listened to your episode of wellbeing on boards. And it's such an important conversation to be had. And one of the points that you mentioned that I really stood out for me is tiny is mighty. So when I started my role as the first chair for a big global retail business, so for those who don't know, an employee resource group, our affinity groups are smaller groups within organisations that are based off identities that provide a safer space for employees to feel like they belong, to talk about discuss and advocate for causes that affect them. So I was the chair, as you said, for the Global South Asian Employee Resource Group, which was an incredible honour, because the intersection of my identity, tying into the work that I do every day wasn't something that I was used to. So it was an incredible privilege to hold that spot. And speaking of tiny is mighty, one of the practices that I implemented, was taking small steps towards a bigger vision and goal. Because when you look at things from a five year or a 10 year perspective, it can be very overwhelming. So it was important to know that one step after the next and when you look back, you recognize that you've come so far. And as the chair, again, one of my practices was failing fast learning quickly, and learning from others. So when I had a learning, I would share with my coaches and even with the wider employee resource group to be able to communicate that, here's what we've learned so that we don't repeat those same mistakes again, or I don't think there's mistakes, there's always learnings. And within that communication, I think one of the other practices that really worked for me was communicating with our executive sponsor, who was the Chief Brand Officer at the time, and also to be able to communicate the bigger vision goals, and the everyday happenings of the employee resource group, with the group themselves to be able to bridge the gap effectively. So having very open communication channels, and of course, diversity and inclusion being at the heart of the practice of this because it was all about bringing your identity to work, and to be able to have radical, courageous conversations and stepping into the brave space. So we had conversations around the intersection of the LGBTQIA community with the intersection of South Asian communities because often, you tend to get put into buckets when you come from a historically underserved backgrounds. But then when you think of or a brown person can identify as queer. You can have someone who has As neurodiversity, someone who's disabled and to be able to come together with those intersectionalities was really beautiful. So I think intersectionality was another important bit. And then again, you know, addressing things that were top of mind for a lot of people. So to be able to talk about wealth, and financial wellbeing with the employee resource group, as well, to be able to advocate for a more secure financial future for our members as well. And I know that's at the heart of wellbeing. When we think about wellbeing. In general, we think yoga practice gym, therapy even. And yes, those are so important. But what often gets ignored is financial wellbeing your digital wellbeing your occupational, environmental wellbeing, because if you don't have a safe working environment, if you don't have the financial security, to be able to afford to go to the gym, or to a yoga class, it doesn't serve or support your wider dimensions of wellbeing.

Helga Svendsen 11:05

Oh, there's already so much to dig into there. So that's immediately made me think about they were the things that you had put in place as the chair of that committee to ensure within that committee that there was that wellbeing an inclusion, and what that's prompted in my mind, as well as there's some great lessons in there for boards for boards in thinking about inclusion and wellbeing in the workplaces that they are governing, to think about how do we have a learning environment? are we encouraging failing and failing fast and learning from that? How Are we recognizing or celebrating or acknowledging or whatever intersectionality? Like even having, like, I think I heard initially, when you were part of this group, you know, it's a group that's based around identities. So for people listening to this, who are on the boards of organisations, does your organisation do that? Does it have a forum for people to learn and grow and advocate around identity? And thirdly, yeah, economic security, it's all well and good, you're providing the yoga class, but what do you for those that are listening that are in the boardrooms of the organisations that they govern? How are you providing economic security for your people that are the most important thing in your business?

Ruhi Meghani 12:19

Absolutely. Those are such good points, and so well encapsulated. And to be able to look at it from even an advocacy point of view, having agency and advocacy for people to be able to speak up for the issues that matter to them. So for example, when the COVID, 19, crisis hit in India, there was employees all around the world, and including myself, I was feeling helpless, because I had family back there. The borders were sharp, what can we do. And this is where that shift from awareness to action takes place. And we did a listening session, which was company wide open to everyone who had friends and family in India and other affected places by COVID-19. And we were able to negotiate a 200,000 US dollar donation to charities on ground. So that's the real impact that you see of seemingly grassroots movements, but they can have massive impact.

Helga Svendsen 13:19

Again, for people who are listening here on the boards of organisations, what should they be looking out for in their organisations? You know, the papers come up from the people and culture committee or whatever it may be? Or maybe there's no people and culture committee, but the Board Papers come up about culture in the organisation? What should they be looking for? What are the triggers? Are the signals of inclusion and wellbeing in that workplace place? Or what are the red flags they should be looking for?

Ruhi Meghani 13:46

That is such a great question. If you're not hearing any strong feedback, or feedback for improvement, or seemingly tough conversations, that is a red flag, because you immediately think this is a situation where there is artificial harmony, as they call it. And what you really want to look for is the language of intersectionality and inclusion as an integrated part of who you are. They're not separate conversations. They're not, oh, we're going to plan to have a meeting about a meeting about inclusion. That's not a thing. It needs to be an everyday integrated conversation. Another thing to hear and look out for a psychological safety. How do you deal with failure? As an organisation? Do people feel safe enough to fail? And what happens when someone quote unquote, does fail? Because we know that the most diverse boards and organisations and companies diverse in so many ways visible and diverse in thinking and the more broad range of thinking and ideas you have, the more innovation you have an innovation cannot exist without trial and error.

Helga Svendsen 15:02

It's the value of think about diversity in the boardroom or diversity, equity and inclusion in the boardroom. The more diverse voices you have, the more likely you are to have that innovation because you've got those different voices, as long as there is inclusive practices. And it's not just, Oh, excellent. We've got this person, and we've got that person. But in fact, the whole conversation is just about the overriding norm, I guess, if people are in the in the boardroom at the moment, and they're not chair of the board, what are some things they can do in terms of that rich conversation happening in the boardroom? What are some ways they can back lead? Those inclusive conversations, then, also, hopefully, ensure that the inclusivity and so on is happening within the organisation?

Ruhi Meghani 15:48

Yeah, that is such a great question. And it comes back to one of my passions that I love talking about as well, is storytelling. We know that storytelling changes the way we think, lead and act, storytelling has been a part of as all this humanity is. We've been telling stories for generations and generations. It's how we shape our thinking, our behaviour and actions. So can you story tell, through either success stories, they don't have to be success stories, they can be stories of pain, as well, because stories evoke emotion within us, as humans, and emotions are what drives us to change. So if you can gather genuine, authentic, ethical stories, and ethical storytelling is a whole other topic as well. To be able to speak to the human side of things, it makes so much easier. So if you have an example of a shift, or an a piece of advocacy that you want to bring to the table, can you bring along a story with you that would, a evoke emotion, but be also encourage conversation, and ask people to share their stories as well.

Helga Svendsen 17:02

I'm thinking about the example you gave before about COVID and being locked out of the countries that you are from my in laws only live in South Australia, but even just being locked out of that state was so difficult. And just so people sharing those stories about I can't get to my country. It doesn't need to be exactly the same. It can still evoke for people, what's their own feelings around that as well.

Ruhi Meghani 17:28

Absolutely evokes empathy on a whole different level.

Helga Svendsen 17:32

I love it storytelling in the boardroom. It's interesting. We had a committee meeting I was at a number of years ago. Now we were talking about the modern slavery statement for all things. I think it was the audit and risk committee, or maybe the finance committee or something. And we got lots of data about it. And I said exactly that. I'm like, This is great. This is great. But I want you to tell me a story about what difference it has made for us having a modern slavery statement. And the poor CFO is like, what do you mean, tell a story, obviously, your father died. He stepped up, he stepped up he kind of was befuddled for a while. And I actually think it came back to the next meeting. But then, you know, got there. And it tells the story of what it's actually about.

Ruhi Meghani 18:14

It's incredible. And what Bren Brown says that stories are data with a soul.

Helga Svendsen 18:19

Yes, exactly. And they speak to different people. Like, I'm not the finance dude. I'm not the bean counter. But I was on the finance committee. So the others there the data worked, and like, well, it doesn't work for me. So let's think about some other things. It's interesting. You mentioned a moment ago, ethical storytelling and said, Ah, but that's, it's like you've said it now. And now I need to know what you're talking about. Tell me about ethical storytelling.

Ruhi Meghani 18:43

So you know, there's been times where, and I'm sure you and people listening to this can relate when you're narrating an example. And then someone asks you a question that is not directly related. But the question makes you a bit uncomfortable, and you almost feel like you're being put in a spot. And you feel like you have to answer that story. Now, in a way, it is a little bit in your control. But then in cases, like we see, especially in today's media, you look at who is telling whose story and the persons whose story is being told, had they given permission for their story to be told, Have they written off on like, Yes, this is the angle that I'm happy with. You know, and we noticed a lot in this ethical journalism side of things as well. So to be able to give power agency and also appropriate renumeration, because a lot of the times people aren't given, do fair dues for telling their story as well. So that's a little bit about ethical storytelling.

Helga Svendsen 19:51

Yeah, great. Okay. Thank you. Thanks for clarifying my or satisfying my curiosity there that makes perfect sense. Yeah.

Ruhi Meghani 19:59

There's an incredible organisation called Our Race in Australia that does a lot of work specifically in this space. Right?

Helga Svendsen 20:07

Our race, is it? Yeah. Okay, we'll see if we can dig that up and pop a link to that in the show notes. That's a fantastic because again, it's something I would personally would love. I love this idea of more storytelling and storytelling in the boardroom. It's not just data and ticking and so on, I love the idea of stories in the boardroom, in in regular listeners would know, I was previously on a health board, and we often do the patient story. But it doesn't have to just be the patient story. It can be an employee's story, or customer story, or a user story, or whatever it may be. And I imagine that also, yeah, that, of course, builds on that wellbeing and inclusion as well.

Ruhi Meghani 20:46

Yeah. In terms of your experience of being on a health board, like you said, what's been your kind of experience in witnessing this shift of conversation around wellbeing on board? I'm so curious.

Helga Svendsen 20:58

Yeah, it's interesting. And particularly, you know, having just, I don't even know if we're through the pandemic, but wherever we're at a different phase of the pandemic. Now, wellbeing, I think, during the height of the pandemic, in our health service, it was just about supporting from afar, like at the time, we as board members couldn't go to the hospital, obviously, all of the frontline staff were going in, but we couldn't start with supporting from afar as much as possible and just food available for people. Although even that was tricky, because you can't share food. And we didn't want people eating in the TV rooms, you wanted them to eat outside and so on. So there was all sorts of trickiness in it, having individually wrapped so that they could do this, or coffees and all of that sort of stuff. So providing what we could as much as we could within the guidelines that we could, but it was tricky. And we knew that the staff were exhausted, we knew the leadership was exhausted. And we also knew there was no at that, particularly at the start, there was no real end in sight. So I think for us, it was empathizing, as best we could, I think we consciously particularly for the leadership team, kind of said, What do you need from us? And what do we need to back off on so we backed off on a bunch of things because we're like, you know, what, you just deal with a pandemic. And obviously, we need to have assurance on a range of things, but we don't want to put extra pressure on. So we backed off where we could we empathized where we could, and in between we provided what we could, but that was often quite limited. But the fallout is still happening, people are exhausted. And that's not just in health services. People are exhausted everywhere.

Ruhi Meghani 22:30

We're going through a collective period of grief and burnout as a society.

Helga Svendsen 22:36

Absolutely and our cup is not, you know, in terms of resilience, and so on our cups not full, we're not, or our tanks not full or whatever analogy you want to use. We're not starting from a full tank. So we're still filling it up again, I think. And some people would like to think we would all like to think we're on the other side. And we're not on the other side. So we can't just inverted commas go back to normal.

Ruhi Meghani 22:58

There's a cognitive dissonance of yes, everyone kind of knows and feels that we're all burnt out. But the expectation of productivity and hustle and improvement is still the same.

Helga Svendsen 23:12

Absolutely. And I think it is a delicate balance for everyone. And I think it's being able to have open conversations and truly open conversations where executive teams can push back where boards can push back as well. Like maybe when leadership teams are saying, you know what, we can't do this every now and again. It's like, Well, I'm sorry, but we need to, but we can pull back on this or whatever it may be. But I think it's being able to truly have that openness of conversation about what is and isn't possible.

Ruhi Meghani 23:39

Absolutely. And its risk management when it comes to business mitigation of risk management in business. What is the cost, right? And the cost of this is that often, in the long run, you can have collective burnout in and across the organisation, resentment and lack of fulfillment in other areas of life, whether it's social, mental, physical, etc. And it will have a compounding effect. Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 24:05

So, inverted commas. Increased productivity for today might just mean burnout, which is no productivity for tomorrow. So we've got to slowly, slowly, I think, to rebuild and rebuild all of our resilience, and boards need to be aware of that. Like, we can't just go it's over. Full steam ahead. Yeah, if we're not there. So with all of what we've talked about, we've had this beautiful conversation that's touched on a whole range of things, what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Ruhi Meghani 24:36

I love this principle that I use in my facilitation. And as an inclusive facilitator, it's really important to know 'nothing for us without us'. You can't design something without including that person or that group of people in the process. So having lived experience and having perspective is so important. especially when it comes to things like social impact governance. in boardrooms, if you're designing for a diverse group of people, you need to have representation. And this is where the visible representation is so important, it goes beyond tokenism. It's really meaningful. And another point that I would like to drive home is, if you're on a board, your role is to make things easy, in a sense of way, right. And facilitation comes from the word Vassilis, which means to make things easy. So you're a facilitator. So how are you facilitating operations, people, and wellbeing of people? How do you make them easy for everyone, including yourself. And this is where caring you know, they say, you can't pour from an empty cup. And this is where prioritizing your wellbeing can not only be an investment for yourself, but also in the board that you're on.

Helga Svendsen 25:59

Is there a resource you would like to share with the take onboard community?

Ruhi Meghani 26:02

I would love to so I know we ‘fan girled’ on this book earlier, but Radical Candor by Kim Scott, it talks about how to challenge directly and care personally, and to give and receive feedback from a place of compassion. And to become a better leader. Kim also has a new book called Radical Respect coming out, which I'm really excited about. There's this amazing author called Lily Zheng, and their book is releasing, it's called DEI Reconstructed, and Ruchika Tulshyan's Inclusion on Purpose. So these would be kind of my three leadership inclusive leadership books for everyone. And as the last resource, if I can, I came across this quote that I'd like to share with the listeners. Great, yes, go for it for whoever's listening, if you can, hopefully, you're not driving, but if you are able to close your eyes, and I'd love to share this quote, by Nicola Hobbs. Take a deep breath in, exhale. “Growing up, I never knew a relaxed woman. Successful women? Yes. Productive women? Plenty. Anxious and afraid and apologetic women? Heaps of them. But relaxed women? At-ease women? Women who don't dissect their days into half hour slots of productivity? Women who prioritize rest and pleasure and play? Women who aren't afraid to take up space in the world? Women who give themselves unconditional permission to relax? Without guilt? Without apology? Without feeling like they need to earn it? I'm not sure I've ever met a woman like that. But I would like to become one.” And if there's anything I can gift, I would say, "Rest is Resistance. It's a beautiful book by Trisha Hersey as well. Prioritize yourself your rest, because it'll all do us. So good.

Helga Svendsen 28:18

Love that rest is resistance. That's beautiful. Oh, I hope well, my wish for you people that are listening. I love that relax, relax and take up space. That is something that I would love to Take on Board communities to do. Ruhee, thank you. I knew we would have a magnificent conversation about these things. I have no doubt that some of the things that we've talked about might have prompted. Oh, that's interesting. So there's some beautiful tips in there. So thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

Ruhi Meghani 28:52

It's been an absolute honour and a pleasure and a joy to speak with you Helga and you should be so proud of the community you've created. And I hope you see the impact that you're having in shaping so many lives for the better. So thank you for doing what you do.

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