

Take on Board

# Transcript – Sandy Hansen-Wolff



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Sandy Hansen-Wolff about unconventional boards. First, let me tell you about Sandy. Sandy is on a University Board and an advisory board for ITL Lab, a large training platform for entrepreneurs and leaders. She was previously on the development board for a monastery and an economic development board for many years. Sandy has owned her speaking, coaching and consulting business for decades. She has managed several turnarounds in times of extreme chaos and overwhelm. Sandy assumed responsibility of her late husband's company in 2003, which he successfully sold in 2020. Sandy now coaches business owners, executives and leaders and speaks on topics of negotiation, business success, scaling strategies, emotional intelligence, employee engagement and culture, rebuilding business, as well as aligning intuitive strategies to profits. She's a certified executive and leadership coach and a certified emotional intelligence assessor. She is also a mastermind peer group facilitator of business leaders, and serves on boards. You can see why I got Sandy here today she's talking to take on board language. So welcome to the take on board podcast. Sandy.

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 1:16

Thank you, I am so thrilled to be here. Helga, this is the first time that I have gone across the globe to be a part of a podcast. So this was very exciting.

Helga Svendsen 1:28

Excellent. Well, here at take on board, we're having a bit of a year of the International guest. So we're very happy to help your international aspiration Sandy, because, like I say, you're talking the language of the take on board communities. So I'm looking forward to our conversation about unconventional boards. But as always, before we have that conversation, I'd like to dig a little bit deeper about you. But first, can you tell us a story about young Sandy, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 2:00

Sure, I would love to, I would say, you know, now looking back from my middle age perspective, and going back to my youth, I would say that I was always fairly unconventional and unique. And you

know, as a kid, that doesn't feel very good when you don't fit in and, you know, even sitting in elementary school and in America, you know, I can just remember thinking very differently than some of my classmates, and why would we do it that way? Or even like, playground antics? And you know, so I think sometimes when we're unique and not quite the norm and in the culture of group or team that doesn't feel very comfortable. And so as you as you get your own HubSpot about you, you know, I've come to realize, like, well, I've likely always been entrepreneurial and how my uniqueness isn't so much, you know, something to be thrown out as much as how can I really utilize it and own it, especially when I'm working with women entrepreneurs and business owners and leaders? That is the one thing we work on is how do we blast your uniqueness to the universe? And yeah, it great profits doing the business you love to do. And so, so I've started, you know, I've embraced that over the years. I'm really proud of that, because it does take being unapologetic for who we are and how we do things and how we look at things.

Helga Svendsen 3:36

Interesting. Isn't it like thinking, you know, you're reflecting there? You've always been a bit unconventional, but as a child, that's really uncomfortable, often as an adult, it's very uncomfortable, but definitely as a child being different and unique. As a child did that click for you that being unique was great. Oh, it was it was only as you got older that you managed to feel different about your unconventionality.

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 4:01

Yes, that is a great question. And it was very uncomfortable. And I did not have an awareness that this was a cool thing. Which is what I preach to any unique person, man or woman. No, no, I would say that I struggled. I think a lot of our challenges in adult life stem from childhood stuff and usually are between the age of five, five to 10 where some of our mental mindsets really take shape and like that's a lot of times when people turn to some sort of addictive tendency and I remember turning to food as I kind of disowned this part of me I became the fat kid in school which made it even worse you know, now I'm manifesting physically not fitting in and so I think in my adult years, you know, having struggled with food addiction and and now coming full circle on that and actually helping a lot of women conquer that to in their business owner co Chances are their executive coaching, we're still dealing with some of this. As I healed myself and came to realize that myself, I'm like, wow, you know, there's deep roots here and why we do what we do. And but everyone's on the board level to have, you know how it's always been done. And even if it's correct, we just keep marching on the same crazy path.

Helga Svendsen 5:22

Absolutely. And there is pressure in the boardroom, often to, to keep the group together keep the pack together rather than unconventional. So let's talk about that, then let's leap there. We've heard already that you've in some ways, always looked at life in an unconventional way. You've done

training at some of the top Ivy League institutions. So you've always looked at business and at board leadership and leadership from that unique and unconventional perspective. So let's, let's explore your story a bit. Where should we start?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 5:56

When I think about my leadership roles, and where I really started to realize that I needed to embrace my differences and my uniqueness and, and also on our stories as business owners, and, you know, there's so many stories we tell ourselves that, you know, we're basically sabotaging ourselves, and I call them BS stories. Mostly what I call them is bunk stories like what sort of bunk are we believing about ourselves, or the size of our company, or the lack of opportunity that's keeping us totally stuck and sabotaging our success and what I came to on the company that I recently sold, that was nearly it was 19 years ago, when my first husband passed away, I felt like I was stuck there. And like, well, he passed away. And now I have to take over his company, which was in agribusiness. So it was definitely male dominant. And there was a lot of, you know, very kind, men, there's very kind men and women. So this isn't a dig on anything. But um, the chips are definitely stacked against me and I, for the first half of the year, well, first of all, I decided to take over the company blindly. And the reason I did that was because unbeknownst to me, when he passed away, it was in financial distress. in big ways, like near bankruptcy, the saving grace was we had amazing employees and amazing customers, who stuck by us, the first kind of incidents of me really figuring out that we can't, we have to do it the unconventional way. Because it works better sometimes. And these are times now with the pandemic of you know, all of these old business paradigms are changed anyway. But back then, you know, 19 years ago, I tried to fit in as one of one of the boys and I would even like, were muted colors and put my hair in a bong and not wear makeup so that I was more one of the guys. And then I just remember a revelation like six months into it like Sandy, your, your numbers are going more and more in the red. And guess what, you're a woman. So that day, I changed that I started curling my hair and wearing makeup, and dressing like a woman, I'm like, This is gonna be our difference. And I didn't have the history of how a great business company should be run. So it allowed me to test everything that was just a crazy idea is how it starts. But then we kind of bring it back down to like, Well, how could this be logical? How could this have measurable results? And everybody thought I was nuts the way I was going to like structure our company. And I'm like, geez, I think it's going to work. And we started hiring contractors, which ended up being what we now refer to as the gig economy. And I'm like, well, we don't need people to work in house. We don't number one, we don't have money to we don't need them full time. And three, could we get the best people if we just paid them on contract. And that was 19 years ago, I didn't have any recognition that there was a gig anything in it. It was just it seemed to make sense. But the attacks that I got for being nuts to run a model like that were pretty good. And I'm like, I don't know, I just think it'll work. So it's that gut instinct and intuition. So I'll pause there because I'm just so convicted, and especially now, the opportunity is so right, to create these amazing, quick success models if we just rethink and kind of flip, how we're doing company's strategic planning, and all of the rest.

Helga Svendsen 9:50

So interesting, like I'm thinking, you know, I'm picturing you 19 years ago. And, you know, finally just going on following my gut and intuition and doing it the way you want to do it. And that's successful. It's interesting to the boardroom, though, isn't it? Because if you're the person in the boardroom following, you're not following listening, I should say, listening to your gut and listening to your intuition. You also need to bring on everybody around you. In fact, in your instance, with with your late husband's agribusiness, was there a board? Or were you able to have that flexibility to do what you wanted to do?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 10:26

Yes, there wasn't a board. However, you know, people think, Oh, you own your own company, and you have employees, you can make all the decisions, yes or no. Because actually, when you own your own company, I mean, all of your stakeholders, all of your customers, your employees, they're all a part of the decision. I mean, there's actually way more to consider. But, you know, in the boardroom, I think the one thing when I now that I can see, in hindsight, our company model, that heart that we put into everything was the key, I believe it's the key for healing all business right now or and revamping and elevating culture again, is how do we care for and nurture our internal people and external people, customers, stakeholders, stockholders, whatever they might be. And so, so like, yes, in the boardroom, you know, the hutzpah of honor everyone. love everybody. And, you know, let us not be afraid to speak our idea. I actually think there's a huge need, you know, and my coursework at Berkeley, and you know, all of this on the environment, governance, the ESG, the social movement piece, it all speaks to the diversity that we need. And really, it's not about coming in as a belief. You know, yeah, my ideas get shut down. But so does everybody's around the board table. So like, let's just not take that So personally, but really stick to it. Because when you come to a board meeting, and you meet people, soul to soul, or heart to heart, however, you want to say that, all of a sudden, they listen to you differently to as you just care for them as people first, I guess I don't have this hierarchy thing like, well, that person owns a billion dollar company, and I never did. I just think we're all the same on a universal plane. Yeah, so a lot of boards get hired and selected by, you know, the size of the company that they were involved in, or something. But really, we need entrepreneurs and really creative, innovative thinkers on a board now to

Helga Svendsen 12:34

Diversity in the boardroom, or diversity in any group, really, you know, we're talking about the boardroom. So diversity in the boardroom, all of the evidence is that it leads to better decision making stronger outcomes for the companies, or for the organization's I should say, because they're not all companies as well. So I'm hearing a couple of things in there that there's that unconventionality. So entrepreneurship, innovation, and that heart, leading from the heart. And I think what I'm hearing there is just do that yourself, and then others will follow. You don't need to wait for the whole boardroom to say we're all leading from the heart. And we will think about how that happens.

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 13:11

It doesn't even need to be spoken, it's more of an essence. You know, like, if you think about companies now, so many goals, like I actually started a strategic planning model for companies where we go in and we unify a team, like the key leaders first, working on the synergy between our logical brain and making decisions, which is usually where all decisions in companies get made. But what I add is a checkpoint of like, okay, we've got these logical brain based tactical goals. What does that feel like? And can we see it? I call it the infinity loop. Like we need to loop down to our gut instinct and kind of our heart level to do that check of like, does this goal feel right? Or like, does this strategic path feel right? Because if it doesn't, the results, sometimes I can remember many times sitting in our own meetings where it's like, that goal seems perfect. And I'm not feeling it. But I never voiced it. And then guess what, we spend all this money on consultants, and time, and then we spend even more money going down this path. And it's like, either an epic fail or very lukewarm and results, and we ended up backing up and going the direction that we could feel and see. So I hope companies and teams vision first, and then when we're aligned on our vision, then we set unified goals and the trickle down, or the trickle up, I should say, is very rewarding. company profits, staff, unity, everything, and way more fun, like a release of overwhelm. So that's, that's what the board means tool.

Helga Svendsen 14:51

I'm wondering from your own board experience, then if you can tell us about a time when you were in the boardroom when I think you described it before. Sometimes there's just that click where people get it where there was that, yeah, this is what we're going to do, we're leading with heart, or we are going down a slightly unconventional path, whatever it may be, is there a story from your boardroom experience that you can share with us?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 15:15

I mean, sometimes I agree with, you know, consensus in the room, of course, I think patience is a great word. Because no one should come into any sort of leadership role feeling like a bully. I don't care if you own a multibillion dollar company. And so it's all about unifying us. And sometimes even in a one on one friendship or marriage, that doesn't happen automatically, or in the moment. So one of the boards I'm on now, where we just really are dealing with a situation where the company is really needing to pivot really changed directions, and redefine who they are as a company, and even their model for doing business. And in a larger company, it just takes, you know, it's like the big ship steers slowly. And I'm all about quantum leaps. So I'll give you just kind of like more of an overall story. I think it takes many times of re arranging your thoughts and how you say it sometimes. And even for us to do our own self checkout was my first idea, right? The ideas that you're convicted on, you can speak pretty passionately about and passion is seeking wins more than anything else. So yeah, there were a lot of times where the board is, you know, mostly older, in my case, older gentleman. And then there's me, it or something, or me and one other woman is a little different. And a lot of times, thank you for sharing, and then they still go down the same path. But you have to

almost have a not necessarily a flippant attitude, but an attitude of I'll just stay my course. Maybe not this time, but eventually, or I'll consider other factors as they come on. You know, sometimes you feel like quitting because like, I'm not seen or heard. But then also, I've seen it in my own company where then there's a tipping point where all sudden, what sandbag crazy ideas Sandy had six months ago, now it's coming true. Sustainability is one of them, I was talking to like, we need to pay attention because our consumers are watching us. Even board governance, like you cannot have all white men on your board. Like God, Bob, all the white men I know, you know. And however, your consumers are looking at that and making buying decisions off of it. Well, now, six months later, we're realizing that, and there's no I told you so or ego or arrogance in it. It's just, you know, it's kind of like business leadership, you just have to stay the course. And be agile in the moment, too.

Helga Svendsen 17:59

So I'm thinking, I'm thinking back to my introduction of you now, Sandy, where I mentioned that you've also been on the development board of a monastery, and I'm thinking, you know, entrepreneurial, innovative, and then on the board of a monastery, like, the imagery for me is that they don't necessarily line up. But I could be wrong. So I'm wondering if you can tell us about that experience?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 18:23

Well, I have to tell you how Yeah, I was wrong. I was so wrong. In all of the stereotypes. This was a monastery close to where I live. And actually, I went to a great school with a lot of these sisters teaching us. And so I had all of the opinions and stereotypes ready to go. And I have to tell you, I was dumbfounded by how wrong I was. So these ladies, they're the most educated bunch of ladies I've ever met. No, a lot of the sisters back in the time when most women weren't even finishing high school. These sisters had bachelor's, usually bachelor's degrees at a minimum, usually masters and sometimes PhDs. So here, I come into this development board. And I'm thinking, oh, you know, they pray a lot. You know, enjoy community. Oh, this. They had a 30 year strategic plan. Wow, wow. The short term plans, but they told the truth about everything. Like, you know what, our sisters are aging, they're dying off. We won't need the infrastructure we need. We need to change how we deal with community, how the community looks at us, and it was the most amazing and informative board experience I've ever had. Wow. Yes. And they had a speaker one The historians come in every session and teach us a little bit of history about the monastery, which really was mind. blowingly fascinating, like a good board. That'd be great to plumb 10 minutes of here's a little bit of back history on how our company started. But it was just complete brilliance, and leadership defined. Everybody knew their spot, it was the best example of a business being led well, that I've ever seen. And I would have bet a lot of money against that.

Helga Svendsen 20:34

Oh, isn't that fantastic? I figured given you been involved with them, they probably weren't how the stereotype might be conjured up, how did you end up getting involved with them?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 20:46

I just want to add one other thing. They also interestingly, they're the best board I've ever worked with that really took outside input, like John weatherboard said, and did something with it. And they also prove to me that you can lead with extreme kindness, which is what I think companies need now. And extreme nurturing and still run a very good company.

Helga Svendsen 21:11

Yeah, they are some fantastic tips in there. Like, I love that idea of a bit of history. You know? And yeah, leading with kindness in there. Yeah. So how did you end up getting involved with the monastery board?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 21:21

Interestingly, and to make a long story short, I went through a period of time, a short period, thankfully, about 15 years ago, where I had a stalker I was this was after my first husband died. And there was a gentleman who knew me that proceeded to stalk me, and he had actually went to jail for it. So it was a whole nother podcast. So one of my friends who was a volunteer at the monastery, said, Sandy, you know, you're really off your game, as far as feeling safe, even, I would suggest you talk to the coordinator at the monastery and get involved there, because they are the most loving group that you can trust, again, to work with, and just be in the essence of who they are. And so I had a meeting with the volunteer coordinator, and then she planted me on a board, it didn't take long. So I'm grateful because I love the board role of just visioning the future and then putting that tactical behind it like, Well, we still need to have action. So yeah, so it's kind of based on how to recover from an unfortunate situation.

Helga Svendsen 22:34

So Oh, my goodness. And what an amazing friend of yours, too. I to recognize it be to know have a solution and see to actually say it because that can take great courage as well. What a great friend, shout out to her

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 22:50

Another lady boss who like speaks, speaks and isn't afraid to be unconventional.

Helga Svendsen 22:58

So yes, and isn't afraid by the sounds of things to lead from the heart and to have kindness in, in how she does business as well. Oh, that is fabulous. Oh, Sandy, we've covered so many, so many things, everything from filling out as a child to how to be kind in the boardroom to, sadly, some of your stalking experience. So we've covered an enormous amount today. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 23:25

Oh, I love this question. So first is for anyone listening, of course, think about where the trip ups are, you know, like, what are those bunk stories we're telling ourselves? And is there one common oppressor is our one common thought that's keeping us small, and in that impostor syndrome mode of, oh, I don't fit here, I don't belong here. I'm not good enough. I'm not smart enough. And really test that do a few brave things this year, that would just test you to elevate a beyond that, even if it scares you. Because that's where we get to know what our true capacity is, and true brilliance. And second is, I think that, you know, as tragic as this pandemic has been, it is really our time to step up. And there's so many amazing opportunities and there's so much need. There's so much need for helping other business owners raise their company again, and help their employees get over the overwhelm and exhaustion and how do we unify a team culture, there's so much to be done there. And it needs all of us. So my point there is, you know, there's so much sometimes I'm protecting our own space. I think that there's so much potential and opportunity out there we need to be co creating. It's like above co elaborating at this point, we all need to be stepping up into our complete brilliance. And just doing our greatest work. For the naysayers. Most of the time, it's based on their own self image. I mean, even the most highly compensated big CEO sometimes have, you know, some of them are my coaching clients, and they're not as confident as one would think when you get into a vulnerable situation. But there, they weren't waves to hide it and manage through it. And so why not us? And why not now? And so that to me, I would say, as a great call to action of, instead of thinking, well, these are my limitations, just a really flip that is like, Well, if the limitations are x, that means what How could I 10x or 100x opportunity and go for it? And making sure that our logical goals are aligned with does this the field right? And can I see it coming to life that Oh, really helped us?

Helga Svendsen 26:03

Oh, I love that. Yeah, go for it with both heart and mind. Love it? Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 26:13

Yes, of course, I am always humbled to be connected to other brilliant people listening to this podcast, my my website, it kind of explains a lot of my offerings. One thing that I'm still adding to my website is my strategic planning for companies. So that's virtual or in person, Sandy, handsome, wolf.com, my name, I would love to be connected. And I would love to have coaching clients worldwide that want to really create that movement. And even being on a few international boards at this point. You know, we have hit the pandemic has really opened up our world to a worldwide economy. We're not just networking with people around us, it's worldwide. So we need that presence. So check out my website, sign up for a free, I think I have a 30 minute session to kind of vet out opportunities. And I also do a lot of speaking on how to reinvent business and culture now happy to participate wherever people feel the fit.

Helga Svendsen 27:19

So we'll put a link to your website and to your LinkedIn in the show notes so people can easily find it as well. Ah, Sandy, thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your wisdom and your stories about unconventional boards. I know that the take on boy community is gonna get a lot out of the conversation today. So thank you so much for taking the time to share.

Sandy Hansen-Wolff 27:41

Well, thank you for having me. It has been a thrill and it's just so fun to talk with other like minded people who just want the best for people and everything you know, business society, our world.