



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 294

Transcript – Sara Harrup answers the thorny questions about neurodiversity in this community Q and A

Helga Svendsen 0:00

So folks, you will know that a few weeks ago, we had an episode with Sara Harrup about neurodivergency in the boardroom, and during that conversation, it became clear that there was going to be heaps of questions, and we couldn't possibly do them all. So we just had an event with a whole bunch of people where we got to chat about it. So today is the Q and A section of that event.

Helga Svendsen 0:22

If you haven't already listened to that first podcast, I recommend you do it. There is a link in the show notes, so go, click on that. Go listen to that first episode with Sara of the interview, and then come back and listen to this one.

Helga Svendsen 0:33

As always, I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet. I know we are on different lands. I am on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. And I pay my respects to elders past and present. I also pay my respects to any First Nations people there might be here today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, skies, culture and country, as I know many of you will have heard me say, I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Helga Svendsen 1:12

So I realized that during the event, I didn't introduce Sara. So let me do that now. Sara is Deputy Chair of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, Chair of Jabiru Community Services and a board member of healthcare insurance. She's formerly been on a range of boards, including Doctors for Nutrition, Family Day Care Association Queensland, ESSA Professional Conduct Committee, 3rd Space.

Helga Svendsen 1:36

Sara is a coach, speaker, facilitator, board chair and non-executive director with a unique perspective shaped by her experiences with being an ADHD-er and having autistic traits. She coaches people whose brains are wired differently. They are often in roles where their brains ask a lot of them and facilitate learning for leaders and boards who want to harness the power of specialist, unconventional thinkers for success.

Helga Svendsen 2:02

She very generously gave her time for an interview for the podcast, and as I say, today is an event which we recorded, a live recording of a Take on Board conversation. So you'll get to hear that Q and A today. All right, folks, let's get into it.

Helga Svendsen 2:18

We have a bunch of questions in slido. We will go through them in the order that they are. If people think of other questions as you go, please pop them in and please continue to upvote.

Helga Svendsen 2:29

Folks where I can. I will call on the person who has noted the question to ask it. If you can say your name the boards that you are on, if any, and then ask the question that would be fantastic. However, the first one on the list does not have a name, so Sara, I'm going to ask that one. Sara, first up, how has masking / unmasking shown up for you in boardrooms? What can you share with us about that?

Sara Harrup 2:57

Well, the first thing I want to share is that masking predominantly isn't a choice. I am quite privileged in that to in some circumstances, I can choose to mask in boardrooms, though I have less of a choice. So I would say, how has it shown up? Well, it's there all the time, and that is because boards are really powerful places around social norms, and so it's like taking a concentrated piece of normal society and putting it in a room.

Sara Harrup 3:35

The other part to add to that is, what is the impact of that. It just means I get tired. Has unmasking ever occurred for me? Yes, unmasking generally occurs when unintentional can't hold it together

anymore. Has that ever happened to me? Yes, it happened to me in a board where I ended up not staying. And there were some things happening from a let's say a compliance perspective that I was deeply concerned about, and from a risk perspective, and having tried to advance a conversation in a lot of different ways, wasn't getting anywhere. And so then my natural style is direct, but me unmasked is like direct on steroids. And so that happened, and then I just went, well, this is not the board for me, because that was met with, well, you're clearly deeply confused.

Sara Harrup 4:37

So unmasking can be a positive thing because you feel in a safe environment, you can be yourself, but it can also happen because your window of tolerance has been exhausted and you can no longer kind of hold it together.

Helga Svendsen 4:53

Beautiful. Thanks. Sara. Melanie, I think yes, you are still here. Excellent. Melanie, if I can ask you. To call on you to ask the next question, if you can, as I say, I've just said your name, but if you can say your name and what boards, if any, you are on, and then if you could ask your question.

Melanie Turner 5:10

I'm not I'm Melanie Turner, I'm not on any official boards, but I have been on sports committees, community sports committee. So something similar. My question was around, how open are you with your neurodiversity to boards and exec members so as well as your own team? And that's from both a very in some way, open and inviting part side of things. So when is the environment in that manner, but it may not be, and how do you approach it in those situations? What does that discussion look like? What does that education look like? And I guess, to add to it, has it been successful?

Sara Harrup 5:45

Okay, so if we go back a couple of years in my last CEO role, so I've left that career behind, but I was extremely open with my team, not right from the beginning. It's one of those things that it sort of, there's a gradual for me, there was a gradual disclosure. And it wasn't an announcement to the masses, it was a gradual disclosure in one to one settings.

Sara Harrup 6:12

And how did that then impact that organisation? Well, there actually were many neurodivergent people working in that organisation. Now, some of them then felt safe to disclose. Some of them just

disclosed to me, but didn't disclose more broadly, but it just meant that there were broader conversations happening in the organisation, and it increased awareness, and it helped to bring a bit of a lens to it. And the other thing too is that what I realized on reflecting on that organisation is that I built a neuro inclusive organisation without even needing to talk about neuro divergence at all, because the key message there is what benefits neuro divergent people often benefits everybody in terms of boards.

Sara Harrup 7:04

So look, I'm not putting it on my application forms, but of course, I'm on LinkedIn, and it's out there for everybody to see. It's not a topic of conversation that's coming up all the time. There's a board that I chair. So obviously I have a close relationship with the CEO. I'm very open about who I am in all the ways with the CEO and but it's, again, it's not a topic of conversation that's coming up all the time. However, same thing, we're building a neuro inclusive board, and that CEO is building an inclusive organisation. And so it more comes out in your actions rather than what you say.

Sara Harrup 7:45

Other boards, yeah, look, they know, I think the struggle is people don't really know then how to approach it or what to ask you. So other than they know, please don't cut short break times, because I will be vocal about that, that's probably the extent of the conversation.

Sara Harrup 8:06

You touch on an interesting point there around the role of a neuro divergent person to educate others about their neuro divergence, I would suggest that it's not their role to have to do that. It's a bit like if you had a person who was a paraplegic and in a wheelchair come to work in your organisation, would you expect them to educate everybody about their toileting needs, their mobility needs? Or, you know, you wouldn't put that on them. And so, having said that, it's up to the individual person. If they feel like they're very happy to educate people they can.

Sara Harrup 8:46

I think the crucial thing that this comes down to is that we're all individuals. So if you've seen one person with ADHD, you've seen one person with ADHD. So I approach it from a more of a relationship perspective. So for example, in my chair role, in my relationship with the CEO of that organisation, we check in very frequently about, how are we going? How is our relationship going? What's working for you, what's working for me? What could we be doing more of so I think you can do all of that without even needing to talk about whether someone's, you know, neuro divergent or not.

Melanie Turner 9:25

Yeah, yeah, no, I'm big on personal stuff, as opposed to labelling it as but it's interesting to see what different gateways or different opportunities or avenues we've all got and can take just about educating about individual differences as opposed to the broader concept. So now I'm very much on that that lens as well. Yep. Thank you.

Helga Svendsen 9:49

Melanie, thanks. Sara. Zoi, if you can introduce yourself the boards you're on or have been on, and ask your question, I will then roll the next one in. So Zoi, over to you.

Zoi Jahau 10:00

Okay, cool. Hi everyone. I'm sorry. My pronouns are she, they. I'm a new board member for Women with Disabilities, Victoria, so you can imagine, I do feel more comfortable disclosing certain things. You know, it being a disability organisation, but outside of that and the work that I do, my question is around for organisations, maybe not in the disability space, what do you do when people ask if you have any reasonable adjustments but say that they're not possible? And so in my experience, like I've requested a few adjustments, I'm learning what is reasonable and maybe what's not possible. And some examples that I have is for today's session. For example, I prefer having my camera off because I'm autistic, and it's really over stimulating, and it's like a big over sensory kind of experience if I have my camera because I'm overthinking what I'm doing, you know what I mean? And so it really helps. And things like, Sara, what you were saying about taking breaks as well? I think really important. So I guess, what do we do when we're asking for those reasonable adjustments and they're not being met?

Helga Svendsen 11:12

Sara, before you jump in on that, if I can just add to that, because I think it's connected to this other question. So the other questions there is about before joining a board, how can you assess whether the board chair and the board are supportive of neuro divergent members? I know it's not quite the same question, but I think they're connected.

Sara Harrup 11:29

Let's tackle the where we started. It's interesting. I know the term reasonable adjustments is the term we use, but I like to think about them as performance enablers and enhancers, and so I would go back to the if someone's asked you, and then they forget, that's not possible. I would be having a conversation with them around why did you ask me if I need any adjustments and explore that?

Sara Harrup 11:59

Because there's an interesting question around, did they ask you because they actually legitimately want to augment your contribution and your performance and enable that and help you to contribute in the best way you can to that organisation? Or did they ask you because they're ticking a box. Now you may get nowhere with that. If you get defensiveness with that, that probably tells you something.

Sara Harrup 12:26

And I think sometimes organisations struggle with their own, what I call neuro normative conditioning. So we are all conditioned that from a social, societal and cultural perspective in Australia, eye contact is good, no eye contact is bad. If you're using Zoom, then we need to be able to see you. The fact that you're there is not enough. We need you to demonstrate your presence, that you need to be engaged and looking like you're paying attention, for example, like I will sometimes use my mobile phone if I need a brain break, and there's not enough breaks somewhere, I will actually deliberately look at some sort of complete rubbish on my mobile phone for 60 seconds. And that's not me deliberately not paying attention and skiving off and looking at social media, that's actually me providing myself with a break in a way that's possible for me at the time.

Sara Harrup 13:29

So I think it probably suggests that there's an education need there for that organisation around understanding how their thinking is shaped around what's normal, and to really challenge their definition of normal. So it's a bit hard to answer that without, like knowing more, but I suspect that there's probably some issues around lack of awareness or potentially motivation for why they're asking the question in the first place.

Sara Harrup 14:02

In terms of, how do you know if a board or an organisation is inclusive? And we often use the term neuro inclusive, but really it's inclusivity is a broad attitude and value that people hold. So whether it's what you see in one area will pop up in another as well. It's very hard. I think one of the things that I've learned over the years, we often talk about doing your due diligence before you join a board. And I always say to people that you know you can do all the due diligence in the world, but you don't ever really know until you get there. And some of the stuff you don't know is some of those deeply held, I guess, cultural things about a board, you can look for indicators, but you don't actually know until you're there.

Sara Harrup 14:50

What are some of the things I would look for if they're an organisation that actually like, for example, Queenslander of the Year? Who was a finalist in Australian of the Year this year, Jeffrey Smith. So he has a company Australian Spatial Analytics, and their whole role is to provide work opportunities for autistic and other neurodivergent people. So if someone's out there and proud and celebrating, that's probably you've probably got a pretty good chance there. Other than that, can you see an organisation actively celebrating diversity in their organisation? I would also look at just some of the if you've got access to general information around board turnover, I think that that might tell you something. It just tells you something about whether people's general experience is positive.

Sara Harrup 15:45

And it's interesting because I think Ludmila N. Praslova wrote a wonderful book called Canary Code, and she talks about this concept of particularly autistic people are like the canary in the coal mine, that if something's not quite right with an organisation, their alarm bells are ringing early and loudly, and so I would be doing a little bit of trusting your gut when you're doing due diligence. Generally speaking, there's a bunch of things about the organisation that just feel a little bit not right? That should just have you thinking generally, because often it's not about whether they're inclusive or not, it's actually there's board issues generally that will cause enormous amounts of discomfort for neuro divergent people. So things around if you get into a board and you find that their risk management is in the organisation is extremely poor, and nobody's able to advance conversations about that. That will be particularly distressing for some neurodivergent people, but like for me, that's my thing, and if there's if you see integrity issues happening.

Sara Harrup 16:57

So it's not just about inclusivity, it's often about whether the board is functioning well as a whole, that can actually be a really good indicator of whether or not you might run into problems.

Helga Svendsen 17:10

Good tips on all fronts there. Thanks. Sara, alrighty. I'm going to go to the second one because they're both two votes and the second one was top a moment ago. So this person asks, and I know we touched on this in the podcast, so this person asks. I also have rejection sensitive dysphoria, which can be quite debilitating at times. Do you have any advice on managing this in the workplace and in the boardroom now, like I say, Sara, I know we touched on this in the podcast, but yeah. What can you add here?

Sara Harrup 17:38

I can only share, like it's a big topic of itself, and I can only share a little tactic that has worked well for me, that I stay very firmly placed in what's my role. And why am I there? I am there to advance the best interests of the organisation. Therefore it's not about me, and so when I advance questions, initiatives, topics, I'm coming from a place of even in the language that I use, and I'm thinking about it from the perspective of the organisation, and I'm putting all of my points of view from the perspective of what does the organisation need to do? How do we as a board need to show up?

Sara Harrup 18:27

It's an interesting, subtle mindset shift, but that has been a mindset shift that I've been able to kind of nail over the years that has definitely helped me a lot, and particularly as a board chair, I'm always operating from the position of the we, and that I am merely the facilitator of the we. It also means that the board we can lean into the things that we're not doing well, and that's not about me, that's about us, or throwing my headset around.

Sara Harrup 19:00

Sometimes RSD can strike when you least expect it, and sometimes for me, it can take me a minute to work out that's what's happening like I do think for me, certainly it is inevitable. And what I find helpful is that I recognize that when it's happening, I recognize that within 24 hours, I will have moved through to a much more comfortable place. I like to do a little bit of a bit of a cognitive behavioural therapy technique around challenging some of the thoughts that I am having.

Sara Harrup 19:36

How likely do you really think it is, Sara, that the board's going to get together and chuck you off, because you've raised a question about whether the breaks can run longer, and if that happened, what would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to you, Sara, and what would you do? And I so I can kind of work through just really logically challenging some of those thoughts and going to the okay, well, worst scenario is I end up with no board roles, nobody wants me. And then if I needed to go and get a job cleaning someone's house, I could. And being honest, that is literally sometimes the kinds of conversations that I have in my head with myself around. If no board wants you because of who you are, then you'll always find a job doing something, and then the next day I go, oh yeah. No, none of that happening. We're all good.

Helga Svendsen 20:26

Sara, excellent tips in there. So the next question, what are some ideas for different ways of running board meetings to be more inclusive of people who are neurodivergent?

Sara Harrup 20:40

So I'm going to start in the period before the board meeting. So I love a board portal. Board portals for me, as an autistic ADHD are very helpful for two reasons.

Sara Harrup 20:54

So I have an agreement with the boards that I'm on that there are certain thoughts and things, where I will share my annotations with the chair and the CEO and the CoSec before the board meeting. And sometimes I do that. If I've got a question or a thought that I think is potentially not material enough for me to take up time in a board meeting, I'll pose the question or thought, share the annotation, and then it's got a place to live, and that actually allows me to get rid of that, so that I can not be distracted by and focus on other things. And I have universal feedback from the boards that I'm on that those that use a portal that that is extremely helpful to them, and I find it helpful.

Sara Harrup 21:42

So if you use a portal and it has annotations, have a think about how might you be able to use those annotations to support people's contribution? So, and that works for really introverted directors that might not feel able to speak up. They put it in there the chair and the CEO might be able to, they don't even need to say, oh, you know, Sara asked this question, they might just say, we've had some interesting feedback, and let's advance that and talk about it, so a good board chair can really harness that in a board meeting.

Sara Harrup 22:17

Pace is my number one thing that being really aware and the chair being really aware of the pace that they're using, that they're allowing enough time for, particularly people with auditory processing delay. That's me, yep, keeping the pace nice and measured and methodical, allowing some natural pauses, allowing for breaks.

Sara Harrup 22:44

Other things give people a role. So in the board that I chair, we use that. So, for example, we always do a safety share, and we always do an evaluation of our meeting, and we are very intentional and deliberate about that. We assign the safety share to someone, to a director, and we assign a director to lead the evaluation of the meeting, and we provide a focus, and we say this meeting, we'd like our focus to be on the quality of the papers. And we take turns. We're assigning this director to lead that evaluation that gives people permission to speak.

Sara Harrup 23:19

The other thing comes down to good sharing, I will sometimes deliberately just go round a group and tap each person for their thoughts and contribution. And sometimes I will ask the question. And sometimes it may not be in the board meeting proper. It might be in an in-camera meeting. What is the question or thought that you've been having all afternoon that you haven't felt you could ask? Now, you can only make all of that stuff work if you're in a safe space, and so you have to deliberately cultivate the conditions for psychological safety.

Sara Harrup 23:57

Small group work is absolutely fine. There is no rule that says boards have to sit around a table altogether in a big group. Boards go off and do their strategy days, and they all work in small groups, and they come away all energized and say, that was so fantastic. What a great day. And then they all go back and sit around a table together, having one big discussion.

Sara Harrup 24:19

So there is nothing to say that boards can't on particularly chunky issues, break off into small groups. Each group take a different perspective or aspect that they're looking at, and then feed back to the main group so that and these are all things that benefit every director. So this is my message is that we talk about reasonable accommodations. These are about performance enhancers for every person. I mean, sure there will sometimes be things that for individual directors that it may not benefit the group. But look, I've never seen something that takes away could.

Helga Svendsen 24:59

Not agree more, Sara. As you were running through them, I think I literally wrote somewhere, neuro inclusive practices are good for all, which I know you've said before as well, but some of those things just so helpful for everybody.

Sara Harrup 25:11

The other thing I would just say, too, and this is coming out as an afterthought, but it's not meant to be an afterthought. Making things optional is very important. So we've talked about the concept of cameras on, cameras off, but that goes for a lot of things. Like I'm on a board where we the chair of it, and we deliberately do a check in at the beginning of the meeting. But that check in is voluntary. So I always say if today, or if ever, or if always, you are not in a place or a state of mind where you just don't feel like you can or you want to, you don't have to. This is voluntary. So particularly boards that I've seen, boards that decide to do ice breakers, and for some people, that's like a I would just

rather go and hide in a corner than participate in it. So with all things as where you can making things optional.

Helga Svendsen 26:11

Now, Robyn, introduce yourself the boards you're on and ask your question.

Robyn Simpson 26:15

Hi my name is Robyn. I'm not on any boards. I'm a KickStarter for 2025 and I just reflected this question from a chat in our group, really around how to check when an environment is occurring that might not be supportive of inclusive or diverse thinking, how to point that out in a gentle way so it's not to disrupt but reflect what's happening. What are we going to do about it?

Sara Harrup 26:39

Well, number one, theoretically, everybody would be so brave as to do that. I think in my coaching practice, what I know is that people sometimes want to do that, but the environment itself can make them feel like they can't speak up. If you're so minded as to speak up, I would probably outwardly notice the behaviour.

Sara Harrup 27:05

So I'll give you an example. One of the things that I see happening in boards where somebody makes a contribution or asks a question and the board chair, or the board collectively, has decided that that's out there. What I see happening is a glossing over, the board barely touches on it and then kind of glosses over it and quickly moves on. There's an opportunity there, like, I think when boards are in the practice of doing that, and I do see boards and coach people who are on boards that have a practice of just brushing past people's questions and contributions when it doesn't suit is you could just say, oh, I noticed that question that Helga just asked, we really didn't spend a lot of time on it, and I feel like we haven't given it the time it deserves. Could we find a way to come back to if we don't have time to come back to it? Now, it's important, let's, let's, I think we should come back to it. We shouldn't brush over that.

Sara Harrup 28:03

So I think it's around, identify the behaviour that you're seeing and just describe the behaviour and then suggest a different way of doing it. Now, depending on the board, will depend on how you go with that.

Helga Svendsen 28:20

And might fit into some of the other things about due diligence and decisions and so on as well. Yeah. Nice. Alrighty. So folks, we've just had the event around Q and A with Sara. She already did the podcast. We've done the event. We still didn't have enough time for all of the questions, so these are the additional questions that we didn't get to in the event, but Sara has kindly agreed to stay online so we can get through them.

Helga Svendsen 28:46

So first up, Sara, it's actually a question from me. So sometimes boards and organisations use a variety of tools like the Human Synergistics, LSI tool, or any other, you know, psychometric fill in this survey, self assessment type thing. I'm wondering how you can, if you can share how they work or don't work with ADHD?

Sara Harrup 29:10

So I think, I'm not an expert in all tools. What I will say is that some of the things that a tool is not a tool is not a tool. So people talk about the MBTI, and that is not a tool, in my view. So there's actually not particularly good evidence around the efficacy of the MBTI, and so widely used in business so, but most psychometric tools are built for neuro normative thinkers, and so for someone with ADHD, some of the things they might have difficulty with is, if the tool is a time sensitive tool where they're being asked to complete it in a particular time frame, they may struggle to complete it within the allotted time frame, and you've asked specific about ADHD, but you know, some of this stuff you could generalise more broadly, and tools may not actually bring out the cognitive strengths of the person that's completing it.

Sara Harrup 30:12

And also some tools, particularly, say like for autistic people, who may have a more literal interpretation of language and questions and communication, some of the questions may actually not make sense, so if they're quite abstract concepts, and there's no ability to ask for clarification, and so the tool in it, but in and of itself, is not reflective of potentially, how a neurodivergent person may navigate their world, which might be to seek clarity, check, get more information, process and then answer.

Sara Harrup 30:48

And so you might find like I was talking to a gentleman recently who had done a round of psychometric tests and had declared him a failure at certain things and that had prevented him from

getting work, whereas he had all sorts of ways that he could actually make some of the areas that he was sort of assessed as being weak in, he actually had very practical ways of how he navigated those things. So I would say that they can be challenging those tests and they may not actually allow strengths to rise.

Helga Svendsen 31:26

To some extent, I must say, it can be the case with everyone and anyone. And I would say boards or any organisation need to be clear on why they're using them and what purpose and how it's been properly debriefed in a strengths based way.

Sara Harrup 31:40

The interesting parallel is ask any parent of an autistic or ADHD child how they found their experience of NAPLAN.

Helga Svendsen 31:51

Next question somebody has asked, how do we integrate conversations about preferred communication and adjustments into the onboarding or induction process, or even planning for strategy days and other processes.?

Sara Harrup 32:05

I've actually got a little tool I can point people to this. I mean, the first thing is, always be intentional. So if you know that you want to do that, just be intentional about it and have the conversation.

Sara Harrup 32:19

There is a great little tool. I'm just there's an organisation called Ultronauts, and the website is ultronauts.co they actually have, and you don't actually need to buy this or even do it, but just the concept of it. It's called The Biodex, and it's about helping your teammates understand and adapt to your work style and preferences.

Sara Harrup 32:39

But it's really practical stuff like my preferred communication style for these types of queries is email. If it's this, call me. I do not use instant messaging. These are my turnaround times. If you do instant message me, I'm likely to reply within 20 minutes. If you email me, you can expect to apply

within 24 hours, things like, if you want to meet with me, my preferred method is that you email me and send me a calendar invite first. Don't turn up at my desk and stand behind me and say, have you just got a second?

Sara Harrup 33:15

So it's basically profiling a lot of the things that pop up for neuro diversion people around things that they may impact their comfort and ability to function in the workplace. So I'd recommend people go and take a look at that. I think you can actually do get your own Biodex for free. There is a team one, and essentially what it does is it plots everybody's styles on a grid. You can do that yourself. You could explore the tool. I think it's, the thing about it is being intentional. I do know one organisation that's used it, and it's actually just had this, and they actually don't, none of them identify as being neuro divergent. It's actually helped them enormously.

Helga Svendsen 33:58

Yeah. And again, it's an example of practices that are neuro inclusive and, in fact, awesome for everybody. I will make sure we put a link to that website in the show notes so people can do it. Thank you. All right. Next question, this person says, without naming names, I've experienced multiple boards that claim to be disability and neuro diverse, inclusive, but in reality, are not how do you deal with this?

Sara Harrup 34:30

It's a difficult one, because if you're on those boards, you're faced with the conundrum of, can I influence change or not? And you have to ask yourself the question, in trying to influence change, what is my window of tolerance? How much am I prepared for that to impact me? Because on boards that say they're inclusive and they're not, they will probably be less amenable to change because they're looking through a particular lens at things, and they think they're fine, and so you could have a very difficult time and there can be a personal cost, because change is hard. So often people end up weighing up how deeply do I care about this organisation and what they do, and balance that with their how, what's my tolerance level for discomfort if I try to influence change? My approach these days is I just don't engage. I go find a different fireplace to sit around.

Helga Svendsen 35:43

I confess that's often my view. I am often talking to people about whether it's gender equity in the boardroom or other levels of diversity, and it's what if they're not inclusive, it's like, well, don't join them. Like all of the evidence is that diverse groups make better decisions, therefore diverse boards will make better decisions if they're not inclusive, well, let them run their own race, you know, whatever. Leave them to their own terrible devices.

Sara Harrup 36:07

You're right. And the conundrum people have is that the board landscape is it's a competitive space, and so people, particularly when they're starting out, feel like they don't have the luxury of being able to say no to certain things or pick and choose. And so they're like, I just, you know, I need a need to get the experience. And so I advise people just be really, try to be really aware of your own well being. Because, if you because, what happens is people's confidence becomes eroded, their sense of self becomes eroded, then they start to think that they're actually ineffective board director. And so it could actually, by compromising yourself, you can actually impact your board career in other ways, by losing confidence, feeling like you're the one with the problem.

Helga Svendsen 36:59

Somebody said to me once, and I've repeated, I wish I could remember who it was. So my apologies, folks, if you're listening and it was you, but the boards you say no to are more important than the boards you say yes to. So saying no is okay and yes, people want their first board. Yes, they want to get the experience, but you want it to be a good experience. So yeah, all right. Next up, this person says, as a self employed disability consultant, I sit on multiple boards, but struggle with the inequity of being unpaid while others are there in work roles. Advice?

Sara Harrup 37:32

Oh, wow. So I'm unsure if, if that's the whole board is unpaid or, like, a bit hard to know from that so, so what I would say is that if it's a one position on a board that goes to that consultant, they're the only one unpaid. Well, that is problematic.

Sara Harrup 37:51

I would be going back to what's the board REM policy, and does that need a review, and how does the board put the lens of equity and inclusion over that board REM policy, it is a real issue, generally speaking, particularly for disability inclusion consultants or people with lived experience that are speakers. They're often invited to provide workshops and other work, but not paid. And look, there's a difference between people connecting for mutual benefit and like what we you know, like in situations like this, this is great for both of us. It's a win win for everybody. But do you know what I mean?

Sara Harrup 38:36

There are people need the ability to choose that, though, and often you see people who are invited to do actual work but not be paid, and people go, oh, it's good for your exposure. Or it's often, people with lived experience that come onto a board experience that I would just kind of go back to

the board REM policy and see where that takes you. And unfortunately, because it's difficult, is you've got to have your own boundaries.

Sara Harrup 39:07

So I am asked to do like, significant pieces of unpaid work all the time. Someone actually wanted me to literally take on a piece of work that would probably be about 30 hours of work, and you just actually have to learn how to say no and to say, I mean, I do it in a polite way. I always say I need to balance unpaid and paid work because, you know, I have financial goals, and so I can't help you. And that's an interesting one too. As women, that women are taught not to talk about money, and it's also like, you know, for me to say I'm not looking for any more voluntary boards at this point in time, that's a dirty conversation nobody wants to have, but we need to get far more comfortable talking about money.

Helga Svendsen 39:52

Absolutely. And I would just jump in on that one as well. I think what I'm hearing in that question is sometimes people are in full time employment, they get the afternoon off, for example, to go to a board which means they're effectively getting paid. But when you're self employed, like you and I and the asker of this question, you're not getting paid. And in fact, likewise for me, if I've got a half day board meeting, and a lot of my work is facilitating board workshops, it actually takes me out of paid work for the full day. So there's a big inverted commas opportunity cost in that.

Helga Svendsen 40:24

So one thing I have seen there is one organisation I'm thinking of in particular, and I'm very much hoping to get the chair of that board onto the podcast to talk about it, is there's one board that I'm thinking of that reviewed their REM policy, and it was absolutely it was overtly put to the members of that organisation that it was around diversity, equity and inclusion that they have. They're a not for profit organisation. They had traditionally been an unpaid board that yet not everybody has the luxury of being able to give away their time. And as they are focusing particularly on diversity, First Nations people and so on. They needed to be more flexible about their remuneration policy, so what they have put in place is a daily rate that aligns with their sector. It is done in a very informal way that any board member just has a chat to the chair, and the chair prompts it with new board members. Do you need to be paid for this? Yes, no, great. It's just done deliberately.

Helga Svendsen 41:21

No one talks about it at board, because you don't want people going around the boardroom table going, oh, well, I'm not getting paid. Well, I'm not getting paid. And then somebody shuffling their feet because they are getting paid. And that's only been in place for a year or two, I think, and

they're going to review it, I think, at the three year cycle, just to see how that's working in practice. And I think increasingly boards are starting to think about that.

Sara Harrup 41:44

And the reverse of that, which I've also seen work, is that the board's REM policy says directors are paid, but it also has a clause that says directors may elect not to be paid, and that also gets you across where, particularly in course related organisations where people have different opinions about whether directors should be paid. So it sort of normalizes that for those that could not otherwise participate, and those who are in a financial situation or circumstance where it makes no difference, they can elect not to be paid.

Helga Svendsen 42:21

I would just say, as long as people don't talk about it in a way that kind of idolizes, I guess, not taking payment or donate. Sometimes it's will donate it back to the organisation. And it's seen as a Oh, thank you. And it's like, well, yeah, so I just think boards need to be clear about how that is talked about as well. All right, let's go to the next one that. So this person says, as the mum of a two year old, I find organisations meet my needs as a parent or as an autistic person, not both. What's your advice about this?

Sara Harrup 42:57

I think organisations still think in silos. So they think in sort of and they don't think in broad concepts and values. And so organisations are more used to thinking about how to have flexible work practices to support parents, because that is more normalized, and they're just they probably have an awareness and an education need, and they're not looking at sort of inclusion from a broader lens.

Sara Harrup 43:30

They're probably viewing it from a policy by policy perspective. What's the solution to that? You can try and advance a conversation if you've got any influence in providing, particularly on a board if you're providing feedback on a policy. I mean, if you're on a board, you have the opportunity to ask broad questions about, how does the board stay in touch with its stakeholders around their inclusion needs? Who are those stakeholders? What is the kind of level of diversity we've got in the organisation, and how do we know that we know what their needs are? And how would we know if we were meeting them? So if you're on a board, you can kind of advance those conversations.

Helga Svendsen 44:12

Yeah, sometimes organisations or individuals, honestly, just don't know. And so hopefully an organisation that is open about parental responsibilities will be open about reasonable adjustments required for autism. They just hopefully, like, maybe I'm being a bit glass half full, but maybe they just don't know how to do it, and asking and being clear about and in fact, the next question relates to this. So being clear about what's needed might help.

Sara Harrup 44:43

There's one little and I'm conscious that in a couple of minutes I need to go, but it is worth me just saying one thing as a reminder that when we're talking about neurodivergence, we're talking a lot today about ADHD and autism, but there is this huge range of identities that sit under that neuro diversity umbrella. For example, all mental health states sit under that neurodiversity umbrella, acquired brain injury, dementia, epilepsy. So just as a call out that, yeah, we do tend to focus on ADHD, autism, dyslexia, but it's such a big, broad umbrella.

Helga Svendsen 45:20

Which makes, in some ways, the next question, the next question is about, what are reasonable adjustments to ask for? What's a bit of a shopping list? Now I'm imagining, partly because of what you've just said, it's endless, right?

Sara Harrup 45:34

There's no definitive list, and I think it's an individual conversation that is unique to an individual person. So just like you would have an individual conversation with someone about their workplace flexibility needs because they were parenting, same deal.

Sara Harrup 45:52

But look, some of the things that might commonly come up are things like, and it depends if we're talking board or workplace, but if it's around physical environment, there might be things like seating position. Like, don't want to be seated with my back to the thoroughfare. Open plan is more difficult. Or don't want to sit directly underneath the very bright fluorescent light. Or it can be things like, I don't want to sit next to the tea room because I can smell the tuna and all of this other like sometimes it's around sensory sensitivities.

Sara Harrup 46:29

It might be things like a screen off versus screen on. Breaks. How do we agree on how we meet and where we meet, and what we talk about when we meet. So if you want to meet with me, I'd like an agenda. I mean, and we talk about these things, like reasonable adjustments. I mean, this is some of this stuff... but it happens, you know, people just pop over and go, can we just grab a chat? No agenda, no nothing. Whereas, you know, somebody might say it actually creates a huge amount of anxiety for me. I need notice, and I need time to prepare. I need an agenda. So look, there's a whole range of things. I mean, I can, if you like, if it's helpful to people, I can create some suggestions of typical things that I see come up, noting that it'll be individual.

Helga Svendsen 47:19

The final question, how do we educate companies and boards to incorporate neurodivergency into their equity, inclusion, diversity policies?

Sara Harrup 47:28

It'd be really great if the Diversity Council of Australia would start there. They vary. They don't include it as a standard, and they and I'm not trying to have a stab at them. It has come up in a couple of their events, but it's not part of the standard dialog, and a lot of people do look to them, so that would be helpful. Education is always the starting point. And look in the UK, it's become more and more common for people to bring people like me in to run the baseline workshop, foundational workshop, because the light switch needs to be switched on before people can even get to the next stage. So I think education is the first stop, and then you can kind of start to move forward, because people need their why?

Helga Svendsen 48:14

In this conversation, our initial conversation on the podcast, which led to this was because somebody had raised in one of my board programs. The CEO of our organisation has just been diagnosed and disclosed they're an ADHD. And this person said, I don't know, what do we do as a board? And I said, Oh, my God, that is such a great question. Let me find someone to chat to. So that's how this came about. And I think, again, I do think I could be glass half full, but I think a lot of boards and organisations want to do the right thing, and just don't know where to start.

Sara Harrup 48:45

Exactly right, and they don't want to get it wrong, and they don't want to offend. They're really worried about offending or upsetting someone, and so they can be a bit clumsy. And so yeah, I mean, part of the education piece is just dismantling that.

Helga Svendsen 49:01

Absolutely, yeah? And people feeling, you know, like you say, feeling that I can ask the stupid question, yeah, absolutely, because I will, I'll mess this up because I don't know.

Sara Harrup 49:13

And even those of us working in the space mess it up too, right?

Helga Svendsen 49:18

Oh Sara, thank you yet again, superstar, thank you so much for giving your time. Thanks so much, Sara.

Sara Harrup 49:25

See you. Bye.

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