Take on Board Podcast – Episode 355

Transcript –Sarah Federman asks: Is it time for a 'Corporate Reckoning'?

Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Being on a board can be an incredibly valuable, interesting, and exciting experience, yet it can also be lonely, challenging, and, let's face it, pretty hard. So here at Take on Board, I'll bring you weekly tips, tricks, and advice to help you navigate your way onto a board, onto your next board, and to build your governance wisdom.

Now, on with the show. Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Sarah Fetterman about reckoning work and potentially about saving one boardroom seat for the past. We'll dive into that. Before we start the podcast today, as always, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet.

For me, 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 acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, skies, culture, and country. I support Voice, Treaty, and Truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now, let me tell you about Sarah. Sarah is on the board of Expeditionary, an applied AI research product and global advisory company, and she's also on the board of Fleur de Lys Summer Camp. Sarah grew up in a global family business where she was privy to board communications, deliberations, pressures, and compromises for 40 years.

She's an associate professor of conflict resolution at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies. She is the author of award-winning books, Transformative Negotiation and Last Train to Auschwitz, as well as co-authoring anthologies, Introduction to Conflict Resolution and Narratives of Mass Atrocity.

In 2022, she testified before Congress concerning the responsibility of U.S. banks to respond to their slavery ties. Her TEDx talk on this topic has been selected by TED's main conference for wider promotion, and we will make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. Sarah, welcome to the Take on Board podcast.

Thank you very much. Thank you for having me. It is so good to have you here, and I'm really keen to dive on into reckoning and what that looks like in the boardroom. But as always, before we go there, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me something about you. Yeah. So I am somebody who has, this is probably my third career.

Um, I had a advertising career before I found my way here to this reckoning work and becoming a professor at a peace school, and I, I loved it. I loved traveling around the world, I loved the people that I worked with, um, and it was a real adventure. And then little by little, I got called back to this, almost unwillingly in a way.

Um, I was working in Paris, and I started to wonder about the role of the railways in the Holocaust, and I started poking at a question that little by little just sort of took over my life, and now my whole life is different. Tell me, this reckoning work... Well, actually, let's start. What, what is reckoning?

In your world, what is, what is reckoning and what is reckoning work? Yeah. So reckoning, like most traditions, religious traditions all have a way to reckon or atone for any kind of upset in the community, right? because as long as people have been living together, they've also been upsetting each other, and you can't just keep...

You need to find a way back to each other once you've done harm. And so all religions that I know of have some way back. Uh, and then after World War II, we started to create political ways back, and I know Australia has done so much about other ways back there from different kinds of colonial harms and so on.

So in the peace field, in peace work, there's been a lot of reckoning happening in that way, trying to figure out how to heal pa- irreparable harms. And we hear universities and seminaries and museums all having to do this, but more and more businesses are finding themselves in these conversations, often unprepared for it, which is why I wrote this book, Corporate Reckoning, that's, that's coming out.

Yeah. I'm not sure boards always do their reckoning, so it'll be interesting to hear some of this, and there is so much that organisations need to reckon for, quite frankly. So how is that showing up? How have you s- how have you seen it in your work that you do? How have you seen it showing up? I'm wondering if there's a story you can tell us about orga- an organisation that might illustrate some of this.

Yeah. Let me... I actually will go back to the train, the train case in France. Okay. because I was living in France working in advertising. I saw my own name on a Holocaust memorial wall, and it wasn't me. It was a 16-year-old girl who was murdered. And one of my friends had asked me when I moved to France, he said, "When you get to Paris, find out if the train drivers kept their jobs after the war."

And he meant the ones, like what happened to those people who drove deportation trains? It's like sort of a haunting question. Like, what happens after, like the, in the aftermath of these things? And I started studying the railroad and the roles that it played in the Holocaust in World War II, but then I started watching the demands for reckoning that started in the '90s and went all the way to 2016.

First in France, then the United States, and around the world. So the people who ran the French National Railways by the '90s and after, they didn't know that the, that the role the company played in the Holocaust. They were very surprised, and some of them were even Jewish themselves. Uh, and so sort of the shock, I started to see what it's like when executives get these demands for reckoning for something they weren't there for, their families might have suffered from too, and they don't know how to react.

So that's what got me interested, and as I studied the railway, I started to see other companies going through this and not knowing what to do and often doing the wrong thing. Um, and I could talk about sort of, uh, you know, there's a lot of different ways to do things, but there's some things that just make things worse for the company and for the victims or their descendants.

Oh, God. See, I, I know it'll probably come later, but now that you've mentioned it, you need to, need to go there now, otherwise I'll be thinking. So yeah. What are the things not to do? Yeah. So the temptation when you don't, when, when a descendants or survivors come to the company and say, you know, "You owe us for the past," is to like quickly throw it to your legal department and maybe your PR department.

But this is not like a failed product seal or like, you know, something being the wrong colour. Like this is massive irreparable harm, and the pain is far deeper and more complicated. And when legal teams, you know, rightly so, work to defend the company, but when they take such a protective, defensive stance at something that really needs some personal emotive response, it can make things a lot worse for everyone, and it can actually make you more likely to get the, the, the law- you know, a lawsuit.

So it's, there's other ways to engage with the past before it becomes a legal matter. because you know, law- like lawsuits are like war, so we want to deal with this in ways that aren't legal if we can, you know, in go- in going through it. So yeah, I think throwing it to the legal teams, and of course there's far worse, like the Swiss banks like shredded evidence and, you know, some...

Exxon waited for, um, some survivors in Aceh, Indonesia to die is, I mean, the way they dragged out the case. You know, you know, some wait for p- survivors to die. Others shred documents. I mean, there's all kinds of terrible things they can do. But most probably would make the mistake of throwing it to the lawyers right away and not engaging.

As a lawyer, that pains me to hear- Aw ... but I, I totally understand it. No, no, it, and it's... So I'm thinking of how reckoning might be showing up in Australian organisations, and there's so many ways. You know, there is, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, there was a stolen generation, kids that were removed from their parents.

There would be als- uh, you know, I was previously on the board of the Women's Hospital here in Victoria. You know, back in the day, the Women's Hospital was involved in forced adoptions, was involved in the stolen generation because that's, that's what organisations did then. And so it's interesting, you know, there is, there is still, you know, reckoning around some of those things happening now, I guess.

But, you know, colonialism and lands being stolen, uh, that benefits organisations, you know, there is, there is, there is a lot of reckoning to be done, I think. Need to do. Yeah. Yeah. And I just want to say, like, I think working with the legal teams makes sense, but the idea is, like, making it only a legal issue is where- Yes

it, it gets wrong. Absolutely. You want to work w- with the whole board. Like, any groups that do reckoning work, big corporations, you need to get the whole board on board, um, and talk about why you're doing it, uh, and socialize sort of everyone to the idea, and that it's not just about blaming people of today.

It's not saying they did these things. It's saying, "Well, we've inherited the good reputation, and we've benefited from that, but we've also inherited this that we have to address as well." Not saying you have to stop doing all your activities and look back, but saying, "We have some skeletons that we need to, that we have t- to speak to."

Yes. And for many organisations, you know, they've grown up in a different time where these things are, inverted commas, normal or at least common, and- Or illegal ... then down the track do not serve, stand the test of time, um, in that way. So, uh, you know, in your work, I think there's some, um, examples that you've talked about where, uh, board members in particular, but organisations have really taken on this reckoning work.

I think there's Yale, The Guardian, John Hopkins, and others. I'm wondering if you might be able to share one of those stories with us. Yeah. I- The Guardian was one that I thought was really wonderful. So the, the newspaper in the UK. Sure. They had, um, some people... They started to realize that, wait a minute, like, how were we fou- where did our money come from to start The Guardian?

And they found that it came from a number of people, some slave owners, in the Caribbean, I believe. And they were like- Oh my gosh, that's our founding money? Like, we are this, like, justice, call it out newspaper. What are we going to do? And so the Scott Trust is what owns, owns The Guardian, and they set up a restorative team of some in-house people and some external people.

Restorative team, because it's like a restorative form of justice. It's not looking at punitive. And they thought about, "What can we do?" And the first thing they did, what you always have to do, is, "What the heck did we do? Who were these people?" Um, and you know, they say we, but what did they do? Who were they?

So they went and found the plantations. They visited the place, um, and they created a whole response and made a 10-year plan for how they're going to do it. And that was just beautiful to me, because it wasn't like a what can we do this quarter and then move beyond it. They really went into it. Um, and they did all kinds of things, like they even created, like, a scholarship for Black journalists in the UK, but then they d- decided to increase the coverage on the islands where they, plantations had been located.

Like, they designed a reckoning and atonement approach that really suited what their organisation was involved with. And again, there are so many organisations, I think, when they look to their past will have, I don't know, stolen wages, stolen people, stolen land, y- you know, that will show up in so many organisations.

And I guess maybe one of the first tips I'm hearing there is actually just dig for the truth, dig for what is around in there. Yeah. You just need to know your... If your co- company's older than 50 years, there's something in the past, um, that likely your company wasn't proud of. And, and I want to make the distinction between, like, maybe an advertising campaign that just doesn't land today the way that it did in the '50s or '60s.

That's not the same thing as, like, you know, flooding an entire community and displacing them or stealing the children, right? Um, forced adoptions and things like that. Th- I'm talking about sort of mass, mass harm. Um, but what's... It's just so important for people to, to realize that they, these

legacies live in the present, and maybe not for those of us who didn't do them, but they're living in the communities still.

The imprint is still there. And w- any company that's doing, like, an ethics training or has a values or mission statement that had a role in one of these things and doesn't acknowledge it, it really sets them up for sort of a, an inauthentic call-you-out situation. So companies can simply start their, their values statement or their trainings by saying, "This is something...

This is what we did great in the past. This is where we failed, and this is who we are today, and this is how we're doing better." You know, it does, it just can be part of the story. It isn't like a, you know, just beating yourself with a You know, a hammer to, like, punish yourself. That's not what this work is And, uh, it, it, it's, yeah, it's so interesting because I imagine, you know, lifting the cover on what's happened in the past for people and organisations, I imagine there is, uh, quite a bit of guilt, collective and individual guilt that some feel that makes them want to squash it, I guess.

It's like, "Oh, I don't want to deal with that," or, "I don't want to hear it again," or, "I've heard it once, therefore it doesn't need to be repeated at our-" Oh, that's a good point ... induction for new employees or something like that. I, I'm wondering. Actually, that's really... You know, I hadn't thought of it that way, but it's true.

Like, I've heard it, so like I, wait, I know about slavery, so I don't need to talk about it anymore, or we said it. When Yale... So interesting, both Yale and I believe Costco have taken their whole board of trustees to the Legacy of Slavery Museum in Montgomery, Alabama to help them understand. It's such a...

It's so well done. There's a memorial. There's a whole museum. But even though you could read about it, it's something about the way they present it, you're like, "Oh. Oh, wait, I had no idea." Like, the impact on this com- on, you know, the, the community and their descendants. Um, and then it helped them move forward from there.

So I'm sure there are sites, too, or commemorative sites that you all have, right? That people can go to, and they're learning sites. Yeah, totally. I, um, for folks that in, are in Australia and probably in Victoria, although maybe over the South Australian border, there is a place called Budjimun in the southwest of Victoria, uh, which is, um, the traditional lands of the Gunditjmara people.

And they have, you know, eel farming, and they have this whole tour you can do down there. And I've definitely h- I've, I've done the tour with a leadership group, but I've certainly heard of boards, particularly the boards of some of the organisations that are based down there, and I'm thinking particularly in the health sector.

The health outcomes for First Nations people in Australia are not what they should be and are lesser than they are for others. And being able to go and have a look at Gunditjmara, um, sorry, at Gunditjmara country, Budjimun, and to hear the stories essentially of the massacres, um, that occurred really, I think, gives, as you say, a really...

Oh. It's chilling, right? It just gives the full... Yeah. Yeah. It, it, it, it really sits with you, and it's ha- You, you can't unsee it once you've seen- And- ... or, or unhear those stories And one of the, the

hope, right, of, of visiting these sites and visiting these things is both to address the legacies in the present, but also to be like, "Who do we want to be when we're on the planet?

What footprint do we want to leave?" And I know there's so much focus on the present, but there is a way that looking at the past helps us get a little distance from the present and say, "How are we going to be remembered? Holy cow, what are we going to be judged for?" And it doesn't take long to start to get that list.

But the looking backward is sort of a gentler way in, in some ways. Absol- well, that's true too, because it could be this wasn't me. Right. Like, it's not a person. It is a collective responsibility rather than an individual responsibility. Yes. Yeah. So I'm interested, you talked about having a board seat, a seat for the past.

Tell me more about that. Yeah, so- What is it, and w- where has it played out? This emer- this has really emerged for me really organically, because I kept watching France trying to close the door on World War II. Like, it r- how does, like, uh, the high, the high court of France, which is, uh, like, said, "Okay, no more lawsuits related to the World War II.

Sorry, we've done our best, but we can't just keep paying," like, eventually it has to end. It's an administrative nightmare. And then, you know, there were different ways they would try to... And then the train company's like, "We did it. We studied our history. We're done." And then I just kept seeing, like, you just can't hold the past down.

It just is really, has a way of sneaking up. And so I was like, "Okay, so maybe we just have to leave a seat at the table for the past." Like, you don't have to make the whole party about the past, but we just need one chair there, because it's going to break down the door if we don't do that. And when I think about boards and the problems there, you know, we're very future-oriented, of course, because we're trying to see what's happening now and how it's going to affect the future.

And I was always haunted, and I knew I would find a purpose for it, of that saying on the plane, which I'm sure you have too, "The nearest exit may be behind you." D- does it say, you say that on your planes too? We, uh- Yes ... they say that, right? Yes, absolutely. Yes. Nearest exit may be behind you. And I was like, I know there's some, like, deep truth in that, but I can't figure it out.

But it took me about 40 years, and now I think it is some problems, the nearest exit to those problems might actually be from looking back, right? We might actually have to look back. It doesn't mean living there. It doesn't mean spending all our time. We're... I understand companies aren't historians. But what it means is saying, "Okay, we're a heritage brand."

We inherited a lot of different things with that, and so we need to have a spot. And that, you know, you could have your historian sitting in that spot. You might have, you know, different sort of people or, or roles in that spot. It might have a descendant in that spot at a certain time. Might be a rotating chair.

But I think if you can leave a seat for it there, it won't crash in- ... the way it's done for other companies. And does that mean, does that mean literally the board, you know, the board's made up of whatever, seven people, and one of those people is a descendant or a historian or a... Is that what... Or, or is it a, is it a more metaphoric seat at the table?

Well, I was... So, uh, that can be done. Like, we've seen descendants on boards of, like, um- Yeah ... at homes of former US presidents who had enslaved people. Uh, and so that made sense. I was thinking of it more metaphorically. Like, I know it's hard enough to get women on boards. I know it's so hard. Like, I don't know if we can get any more seats.

But I was thinking about one of the challenges that I have seen for, for women on boards is feeling like you need to justify being there, that you can play like the boys at the table. And that can be if you're always talking about ethics or you're always talking... You're, like, playing the female role, you just get pigeonholed in that.

And it's, it's very difficult, it's just very difficult to navigate. But one way to talk about some issues that you may care about is by talking about the past. So talking about history can be a way of bringing in some of the values that you wanted to bring in that brought you to the board in the first place without having to go straight for those issues.

Does that make sense? Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting. I'm, I'm going to tie together a conversation that I had earlier today, but folks on the podcast, you'll have heard, heard it probably a couple of weeks ago now, um, where we talked about nature in the boardroom, and that's showing up in a range of different ways.

Sometimes it is a se- a literal seat at the table. I, I spoke to a woman late last year, Dominique Hess, who sits on a board as nature in the boardroom. Um, or it might be more metaphoric, as you're referring to it. Um, but one of the reflections from the conversation I had earlier, uh, about nature in the boardroom and how it's showing up in the boardroom is that boards and organisations where nature is more, is more showing up, shall we say, often it's from those boards where there might be a st- a person with STEM, um, science, technology, you know, and so on, in the boardroom, or a more humanities base in the boardroom.

And in a way what I'm hearing here is if you've got... You know, what's wrong with historians in the boardroom? Like, it is a different way of looking at things, and it is that diversity of perspective- I love it ... that then can prompt different thinking in all of the different people around that board table.

Yeah. I actually love that. I l- love this idea of nature. It's very It's haunting. The, the... I think my role on Expeditionary, which is a AI negotiation company, it's to help with large negotiations, is they brought me in because I have this, "What about people who aren't at the table? Like, what about the animals?

What about those who have no voice?" So my job on the board is to be that sort of, "Hey, what about, what about... I know you're trying to survive, but what about... And how are you going to be remembered, and what about..." So that's, that really worked well for me. I was like, "Okay, I can be that." Um, so it's not quite nature, but it is, it's part of that actually, and now you're helping me sort of frame it in that way.

Yeah, and thinking of legacy too. Yes. Um, while- And- ... they're dealing with the day-to-day business. And even some organisations I've heard, again, it's not a spot in the boardroom so to speak, but some boardrooms will have a, um, you know, I've heard of one organisation that has a doll that sits in the boardroom, and it's...

I can't remember its name. It's got a name. But it is a customer of that organisation, and it is a- Love it ... I guess a representation in the- Yeah ... boardroom about what we are here for. And it sounds like the past is another possible. Like, there's all sorts of- Yeah ... representations that could literally or metaphorically be in the boardroom, and the past is another one of those that might assist boards to think about their reckoning.

And so many organisations, as we said before, there would be whatever it might be, stolen people, stolen wages, stolen land, leaving aside stolen children, um, you know, there is a whole range of things that an organisation might need to reckon- And, and rather- ... with moving forward ... and when you, when you have, yeah, and when you have that seat of the past, and maybe it should be an actual seat, so you're starting to convince me, um, that, you know, you may want to, if you're going to do any contributions, make those contributions related to un- addressing the harm that the company created.

And so often I see the, you know, "We did this horrible thing, but we give to the opera." And it's like, I, I love the opera, and I support the arts, and I think it's wonderful to give to them, and it's a little deflection from, you know, what was done. And I think it would be more meaningful and even strengthen the company in ways that might be seen and unseen to actually do the, the work that's left undone by the predecessors.

Yeah. Yep. Absolutely. And I, yeah, it's hard work to- It's hard- And I love that the uh- It's less comfortable. Yeah. Absolutely. And long-term. Was it The Guardian you talked about, their 10-year plan? Yeah, yeah. Hopefully they'll, they'll renew it. Yes, it's irreparable harm. People are u- upset, uh, but by facing it, there's just so much more integrity, like the integrity strands of the company gets str- gets stronger.

Oh, Sarah, there is so much in here, uh, so much to cover in half an hour. Uh, I'm wondering, what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today? Yeah. If you're, I'm even a customer of, or an employee of, or, an alm- you know, went to university of some older institution, get curious about that history.

Not like a gotcha history, but like get connected to it. Like, do you know your university's history? Do you know your bank's history? Do you know, you know? And when you know them, one, it actually helps reduce some of the alienation a lot of us feel in, in this, in our times. Uh, and it doesn't make it so scary.

Like, we start to, to take the pieces back that we've lost. And, and when you're part of an organisation that wants to do this work, one, encourage them, and two, if they're trying and not doing it right, encourage them and help them do it better. I hope we don't just like call them out for not doing it perfectly, you know?

But really sort of be like, "Okay, good start. I love that you're addressing it. Now just, yeah. Try it more this way," you know? Absolutely. Yeah, I can't imagine this work is ever done. No. You know, I just can't imagine- But yeah ... you go, "Oh, look" New things come up all the time. Yeah. Yeah, that's right. That's right.

Well, th- that's right, there's new history. Like, we can wrestle with 50 and 100 and however many years ago, and then all of a sudden it's like, oh God, times have moved on again, and we've again

messed something up which hasn't stood the test of time. Uh, yeah, interesting. So it is an ongoing piece of work, isn't it?

Yeah, it really is. Yeah. Okay. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community? Yeah, I mean, I did, I did just... I ended up writing this book on how co- corporations can do it, giving lots of examples from around the world from different atrocities, and it's supposed to just be like, "Hey, you know, you probably weren't trained how to do this."

It's supposed to be welcoming, not punishing. Um, so that'll, that'll be out, but I think it's accessible, a- accessible. Uh, if you're having trouble explaining why do this, I tried in the TED Talk to like say why. Um, some people will never agree, and that's okay. You know, we're all different. Okay. Well, we'll make sure we've got links to both of those in the past.

And it's, it's interesting, in fact, and I'm going to draw back to something you said much earlier in the conversation about restorative justice versus punitive justice. So I love that that's come through in your book as well by the sounds of things. It's not punitive. We're all just trying to help here.

We're trying to restore, not punish. Yeah. Um- Yes ... and I think- It's different. Yeah, it will, and, and it would just become overwhelming if it was punitive I think, and nobody will want to wrestle with the past. So I love that approach. Yeah. So yeah, we will make sure there is links to- Thank you ... to all of that- Thank you

in the show notes. Oh, Sarah, thank you. It's such important work, and it makes my brain hurt a little bit- ... in a way to, to reckon with how to reckon because it is so, like the work is never done. It's wrestling with things you weren't around for. There's no clear answer. Oh. It is big stuff. It's so much fun. I, when I do this for companies and I research their history or help, like, things happen, and it's, it's just...

I grabbed a grad student for this last one, and she's like, "This is amazing!" I'm like, "I know!" Yes. It's not all drudgery. I just want to say that. It can be really- Yeah ... fascinating, and healing, and moving, and yeah. Exactly. Well, I know, uh, like I say, go to places like Budgejim, and there are others around Australia.

It is all of those things, um, fascinating, moving, healing, hard. It can be all of those things at once. So it's good to hear that some of this work has that as well. Otherwise, it'd be like, "Oh, my gosh, you just must need a large glass of wine at the end of every day." Thank you so much- Thank you so much ... for the conversation today.

Thank you so much for the work that you do. It's so important. And yeah, coming and sharing some of your wisdom with the Take on Board community today, I really appreciate it. Thank you. Thanks for what you do. So that's a wrap for the Take on Board podcast today. Thank you so much for being here and being part of the Take on Board community.

I do this podcast because I love bringing good women and gender-diverse people together. So I invite you to join us over in the Take on Board Facebook group, an active group that helps, supports, and cheers squads each other. Just search Take on Board in Facebook to find us. I'd also really love it if you could do some of the other, well, podcast things.

Share the podcast with someone you know who might get some value from our discussions. Subscribe if you haven't already. And, well, I also really love it when people rate and review. Thanks again for being part of the Take on Board community. Now go and put these tips, tricks, and advice into action so you can be your best in the boardroom.

This transcript has been automatically transcribed by Descript.