



## Take on Board Podcast – Episode 374

# Transcript – Navigating Neuro-Inclusion with Sara Harrup

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Sara Harrup about board culture and dynamics through a neuro inclusive lens. Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. 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'd also like to acknowledge any First Nations people we may have here today. I acknowledge their continuing connections 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 Sara.

Sara is a governance professional, entrepreneur, and board chair with a portfolio of board roles, including being deputy chair of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. As founder of Unique Mind Co., she works with boards, executive teams, and individual leaders on neuro-inclusive governance, the intentional design of governance environments, systems, processes, and relational styles that anticipate and accommodate a wide range of neurocognitive styles. She also coaches neurodivergent directors and executives.

An autistic and ADHD woman, Sara brings both professional and personal depth to challenging the neuronormativity embedded in how boards are designed, led, and governed. Welcome back to the Take on Board Podcast, Sara. Thank you for having me. It's lovely to be back. It is so- And I'm, uh... It, it feels like ages, and it feels m- like not long, but- I, uh, I think- I think we established before it's about 18 months.

Yeah I think about 18 months. Yeah. And folks, we did a episode previously about neurodiversity and neurodivergence in the boardroom- Yeah ... and then did a Q&A session where people got to come along and ask all their heavy, inverted commas, stupid questions, so we could explore it a bit, so that was about 18 months ago, folks, and I'll make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. And today, it's not really a follow-up to that. It's almost a new episode, which came about, I think, because I'd seen that you had applied for a Churchill Fellowship around some of these issues.

Yeah. So I chimed in on the conversation there, and it's like, well, let's get you back to chat about this and to chat about, yeah, board culture and dynamics through a neuro- neuro-inclusive lens. Yeah. Having said that, I really want to dive into that conversation.

Yeah. But before we go there, as always- Yeah ... I would like to dive a little bit deeper about you. Tell me something from the last month or so that you're proud of. Yes. So it's, it's, it's a, a strange backwards proudness, but it's, um, I have a, a bit of a framework that I have developed that I use

when I'm working with neuroinclusion and working with leaders on neuroinclusion, and I threw it out. Um, and it wasn't bad, but, uh- My experience has evolved, my thinking has evolved.

There's been some good new evidence, um, turn up in the last kinda 12 months, and I just had this sense that it just wasn't quite landing. So I threw it out. And it was interesting because the thing that actually prompted me to throw it out was I was looking at someone else's LinkedIn post where they have their own individual definition for what good governance was.

And when I looked at it, I went, "Oh, that's the same definition they've had for the last five years." And I went, "Well, what are you doing, Sara, that's the same as, like, what you've always done that you can reexamine?" And that's how it, um, that led me onto a bit of a side quest - Interesting ... as happens when you're like me.

Yeah. Oh, it's so interesting, isn't it? You know, I do use some of the same frameworks Oh, it's, it's this balance, isn't it, between an oldie- Yeah ... and a goodie- Yes ... and fresh- Yep ... and new. Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Absolutely. Interesting. Mm. Oh, I might need to, you know, Marie Kondo my frameworks as well and see what needs a, needs a fresh, fresh approach. It's a good idea. I mean, there's a running joke in my house that you don't let anything here stand still, because I'm likely to dispose of it. So it is in my nature to, yeah, refresh things.

I am definitely the- Yeah. ... you know, cupboard cleaner-outerer, so I definitely do that with physical things. And maybe I need to have a little think about it with my frameworks as well. Excellent. All right. Good prompt. Thank you. All right. Well then, let's dive into the conversation today, board culture, dynamics through a neuro inclusive lens.

Yeah, what are we talking about? I mean- Yeah ... what does that even mean? Exactly. So I- let's start, well, what does it mean, Zara? Okay. All right. So before we get to the board culture bit, I think let's just talk about, there's two terms that came up in your introduction. The first was neuronormativity or neuronormative, which most people listening are going to go, "What does that mean?" So I'll explain that, and then I can explain neuro inclusive.

So neuronormativity is really this invisible set of social rules and assumptions about how we think the average or typical kind of person is meant to function in terms of how do they perceive things, how do they process information, how do they make sense of it and interpret it, and then how do they communicate about it. So we have a pretty narrow set of invisible coding, and if y- and if y- anyone just thinks about, for example, if you ask someone, "Well, define for us, what does professional mean?

What does a professional... If someone's being professional, what does that mean they do?" Well, you know, they're allowed to show emotion, but only if that's in service of communicating. You know, like if- Yeah ... a politician cries when they're talking about a big thing, well, that's okay. But if, if somebody, if a leader cried because they were actually under stress and having a bit of em- well, that's not, that's not professional.

So that's a really good example of how we've got these invisible rules about how are we supposed to function, how are we supposed to interpret things and think and, um, and feel about things and communicate. So in the boardroom, what does neuronormativity look like?

Um, well, it looks like we do most of our work in a room, closed in a room together, sitting around a table, um, in a time-limited environment where we're fluent f- uh, processes. We're able to speak, uh, quickly. We can think on our feet. Uh, we can take in everything that's happening in the room.

We can contribute in, you know, real time, and then we can make a good decision, and then we can move on. Uh, in a lot of boardrooms, it means we can do that for hours at a time without needing a break Uh, supposedly. Um, what else does it mean?

It means that we are, are able to m- um, read the set of papers given to us and automatically make sense of those and understand what's required of us. Uh, and it means that we can actively challenge and do all the things that we say that directors suppo- supposed to be able to do. That's really narrow, and I think what we all know is who does that work for?

A really small percentage of people. So the really interesting thing is when you come across a neurodivergent director, they're a little bit like the canaries in the coal mine. They're going to kinda sound the alarm first and go, "I... That, that board pack, I don't even know. Like, that feels like a tidal wave washing over me, a s- like a tsunami of information, and I, I'm a bottom-up processor, and I've got no idea what you even want from me." And then in the room, um, they're the ones who might afterwards go, "Well, I actually... I can't process at the speed that you think we're supposed to process at.

So I'm going to leave the board meeting," and then go, "Oh, actually, gosh, there's a whole lot of things I am thinking now that I didn't think in the room." So neuronormativity is really important because it just is calling out the invisible set of assumptions- Yeah about how we operate- Yep ... that really are so narrow. And so even for people who aren't neurodivergent, there's a lot of people on the edges there going, "Oh, I don't know." Yeah. And nobody ever wants to call it out.

Yep. So neuro inclusion is really just how do we bring intention to how we design things? So how we know what are the processes we use and the systems we use, and in particular, the leadership behaviour, so in the boardroom, the chair behaviours, and the way we relate to each other. How do we do that to intentionally accommodate and, and uplift a much bigger range of neurocognitive style?

So it's kinda like universal design. Um, a- and it's really interesting because there's nothing, there's nothing wild or, you know, out there about it. When you start to talk about... You know, it all sounds very cryptic, but it's very sensible It's just good for people a lot of it And yes, and but it does require intention, and it can really hit up against, "Oh, but boards don't do things that way. We don't do it that way. That's not good governance." Yes. Right?

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We all have to be very serious and in suits and sit down for a long time and yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? Okay. So then- We need to be intentional in the way we design. Yeah. What are some of the things, and it sounds like particularly for chairs, but I should say not only for chairs, because any board member, I'm assuming, can have a role in this and can prompt some of this. What are some of those intentional designs- Yep.

Okay ... that chairs and board members should be thinking about? Yep. So I'll take you to the re- really easy stuff first. So think physical environment, because it, it's tangible. People can- Yep ... relate to it easily. So I'll give a really good example, and it's my own fault as a chair. I suggested a meeting room for a recent board meeting on one of my boards , and I didn't think about it. Now, lovely room, lots of natural light, winning. Nice big space, so plenty of room for people to spread out. Um, so winning there, but what I forgot was this room was actually next to a, um...

It had, like, a kitchen attached, and when we got there, there were people using the kitchen. So there was a lot of ambient noise coming from the kitchen and f- and other noise from outside of the

room. There were air conditioning issues, so people were hot, then they were cold. Um, so just thinking about, you know, good acoustics, appropriate amount of space, um, being careful about harsh overhead lighting, like being able to either adjust lighting or having natural light. Um, different types of seating. So some people actually might want to stand.

Oh, yes. There's actually no rule that says- Yes ... you can't stand up or stand against the wall or sit on the floor in a board meeting, and there'd be people going, scoffing and going, "Oh, that's not professional." Um, but, uh, there's no rules about that stuff, so it's about people being comfortable. Another really good example around physical things is in the heat of summer, at the end of last year I was watching people come into a board meeting in the Brisbane summer, and a very hot day, and particularly the women in the room were apologising for how they were dressed.

"I'm really sorry to come more casually. It's just so hot out there." And, you know, someone on that board who, you know, has some, um, physical things that they're dealing with who were trying to squash their shoe- feet into court shoes. Yeah. So we stopped and had a conversation and said, "Let's make overt and intentional right now that you turn up to this board wearing whatever it is that helps you do your best work. If that is a suit- Great. Lovely. If that's a sarong, lovely. It's... And if that changes meeting to meeting, day to day, great.

How, what you wear, what you do with your hair, makeup, no makeup, any of that, irrelevant, particularly because for someone like me, autistic, ADHD, I have sensitivity to certain fabrics and certain styles of clothing where I feel restriction, um, particularly around my arms. So th- and th- that changes. So on certain days, wearing a suit jacket might be fine, and then on other days, not so great. So that's a really practical, tangible example. The next really easy piece is thinking about, um, meeting breaks.

Yeah. Like this is a top- we could talk all day about this. Yeah. But having, um, a good, decent break after an hour or a bit over an hour of work is great, and having a, a break after a really chunky discussion before you make a decision. So what you're allowing... So I have an auditory processing delay, which means that if there's a break, my brain will keep catching up, um, in terms of my meaning-making And so that allows a little bit of time for me to catch up, and then I... It means a different thing to me. Um, it also means, like, I rely on lip reading in a room.

So my ability to see people- Yeah ... and lip read, like, i- is also helpful. Interesting. It's such a... I, I confess, I, I saw this in the notes prior, Sarah. Yeah. And I'm like, "Breaks, great, tick. I do that." But when I saw your note about, you know, have the conversation but not the decision, I went, "Oh, I don't do that," because, you know, you kinda go, "Well, that's the end of that section. Great, that's a sensible place- Yeah ... for a break." So, um, I'll experiment with that one next time. The other interesting thing about breaks, and I think back in the last podcast we talked about masking.

Um, so, um, I will inevitably be masking to some extent, depending on the board or the environment. If, um, if I don't get enough breaks, eventually that'll break down. So I have a little bit of a joke with one of my boards that they do like a bit of a working lunch, and I will sometimes about 1:30, 2:00 say, "Look, I've probably not had enough breaks today. I'm apologising in advance. You're about to get the unfiltered version of me." Because... And it's not that I'm deliberately do... I actually can't- Yeah ... um, norm to the environment anymore.

Like, it's- Yes ... you know, I'm... it's, uh, it's not possible. And so then what happens is I will revert to my natural communication style, which is really direct, and isn't always what... And, uh, and for some boards, if they were very neuro inclusive, that very direct style would not be interpreted in any

other way other than- That's how I communicate. But for most environments, if you're a very direct communicator, that can be interpreted as abrupt, rude, abrasive.

Yes. Yes. So I'm always trying to add a layer over that of softening. Yes. Mm. Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that makes perfect sense. Although sometimes, I don't know, depending on what the board's like- Mm maybe they're like, "Ah, we need to get Sarah to her direct part." No, that's not what- Yeah ... we're aiming for.

Yeah. Okay. So there's a whole bunch of stuff around the physical environment. There is taking breaks and properly taking breaks, the timing of those breaks, so potentially, as you say, before a decision. Again, just because you might have given me a heads-up about this prior. Y- y- you also did some work, um, on one of your boards, I think, around the board papers.

Mm. Talk to me about that. Yes. So papers are... I mean, look, ask any, ask any board, "What's one of your problems?" And they'll go, "Ah, the papers. We just can't ever get them quite how we'd like them to be." Um, and I think part of the issue with that is that we know what doesn't feel good when we see it or experience it, but we're not quite sure why. So I kind of put this different lens over papers, and one of them is, like, there's actually a sensory lens to a board paper.

So when I am looking at a paper and if the fonts and the formatting and the density of the text and the, um, the level of jargon that's used that's not kind of plain wording, I can actually get a really overwhelming sensory experience that means that I find it really hard to focus on what is the paper actually saying. So we can always talk about, you know, the full stop police, but there's actually a little bit of something to that. And one of the things about it is that we're looking for- A good sensory experience in the paper. We're looking for some level of predictability about there are things...

The paper's flowing in the way that I would expect it to flow, and it's covering off the kinds of things I would expect it to cover off, and there's no massive surprises in there. There's no kind of, you know, bomb hidden in the back end of it somewhere. And so predictability is really important in papers, not in terms of anticipating exactly what's said, but understanding how the paper might flow and what I'm...

So some of the things where we'll ask the, um, ask management to go, "Look, start by telling us upfront where it is you think you're taking us to, and then start to build the journey bottom up for us so that we understand where the destination is, and then we understand where you're leading us kinda to." Um, and then there's also things around, I touched on the use of jargon, but the level of corporate speak in a paper actually can create feelings of mistrust. There's some really, really interesting piece of research that's just been released on... Well, there's been a few pieces.

But the latest piece released on corporate bullshit, if I'm allowed to say that in your podcast- Sure you can or corp- corporate BS- Yeah ... actually is that, um, that it actually those people that are heavily influenced by it are less likely to be good decision-makers, and those people who are not likely to be in- influenced by it are going to find it very distracting, and it'll influence their level of trust. So plain, just say what it is you mean in plain language. You don't need to use big words or corporate speak or jargon.

And so, uh, the, the work that I'm doing on one of my boards on papers, it's ongoing. Like, it never stops. Um, but it has really made the difference between, as a chair, how I've seen the board react and respond to items in a huge way Um, because one of the things I think as a chair you don't want

is you don't want a seed of anxiety plunged into your board because it's like COVID, suddenly everybody's got it.

Um, and so having really good papers that are kind of run through this lens of neuroinclusion, like we've got a wide range of people here who process and, and, um, you know, their nervous systems are all really different. What do we need to do from a universal design perspective to help them get through these papers really well?

Interesting. Um, lower anxiety. And so if you think about from the disability sector, you'll often see, here's the easy read version of the paper. Like, there's a s- huge amounts of crossover and synthesis- Yeah ... in these things. Here's the- And who doesn't love an easy read?

Yeah. Yep. Here's... Yep. Who doesn't love plain English? Yep. Like, yeah. Oh, yes- Yep ... we'll do this for accessibility, but hey- Yeah ... I love it. Yes. Yeah. And in fact, that, um, the easy read version is a great... Here's the, the cover part of it, and then if you want to go into the greater depth, then there's the piece that sits behind it. So there is a lot of crossover between, um, when I'm talking about neuroinclusion, inclusion generally. Um, and I'd also have a philosophy that if you're doing neuroinclusion well, you should be ensuring that you're doing inclusion well full stop.

Yeah. Absolutely. Mm. It's so... Yeah. Yeah. I mean, as I say, things like breaks, things like accessibility of papers, and I mean accessibility not in a technical way, but just as in being able to understand what's in there and being able to tell the story and, you know, all of those things. They're just good for everybody. The... And the bit that, because I'm conscious we haven't come to the bit, what's all this got to do with board culture?

The, the piece of, the piece of neuroinclusion that is so important is the psychological safety piece. So, um, and what I've seen when you have that, um, in place, um, and you have relational styles where people are genuinely curious with each other, um, that it's okay to say, "I don't actually know what that means. Can you, like, can you help me explain that in a different way?" Um, that you see this very different kind of board dynamic.

So a really good example of that was I was in a meeting, it was a while back now, on a board that has a really high degree of psychological safety, and one of the directors, uh, well, they were talking about something And the director next to them stopped them and said, "I know that you're saying these things, but I feel like that's not what's going on for you. What's really going on for you?" And they said, "Well, I'm actually... I'm anxious.

I actually want to do-- I really want to do a good job, and I'm anxious that if I c- if I can't get that bit right, I'm not going to g- do a good job." And then that d- director said, "Well, why don't we have that conversation?

How, how do we support everybody here to do a good job?" Now, I don't think I've ever seen that level of psychological safety really in a board before, but I went, "Wow, that's what becomes possible." And so then what becomes possible in a psychologically safe environment is for somebody like me to say, "The autistic Sarah, right now I, I'm really struggling with... I'm struggling with whether that's actually the right and just thing to do," like high justice sensitivity.

And I actually, if I feel safe in an environment, I can actually say, "It's endemic to who I am, um, and I'm struggling with it, and I, I feel like I'm, I'm struggling to let go of that. Could we pause?

Um, y- I either need to feel like I can get through that part or get redirected or come to something I can live with there." And again, it's, it's, you know, much of these designs and intentions might be around, uh, neuro inclusivity, and they're good for everyone generally.

Yes. Generally. And- Or, or at least- Absolutely ... not a disadvantage to others- They are- Like, well, there's, you know, just- There's good research, Ilia. The research actually says, um, that neuro inclusion benefits everybody. So there's this amazing piece of research released by EY, and they did a- across 2,000 people across 22 countries. Um, and, and it was basically, you know, what does it look like when it, when neuro inclusion's being done well, and what happens?

Um, and what happens if it's not going so well? When it's not... If it's, if it's not going well, if a, if an environment isn't neuro inclusive, I think the statistic was 39% of people were leaving, thinking about needing to go within the next year. Um, but they actually found capability uplift across resilience, leadership, strategic thinking.

Yes. Interesting. Yes- Right? ... because you've, you've, it-- you're more able to focus and explore and yes. Yeah. It makes perfect sense. Makes perfect sense. And the, the clincher here, which I think, because in Australia, you know, we're really-- we're in the early phases of neuro diversity awareness. Like we're, we're still not even... We're getting there, right?

Um, Diversity Council of Australia have just released their first kind of guidance on if you want to capture that data about your workforce, here's how you do it. So that's a good resource. That's just been released in March, I think. Um, but- Neuro- neurodiversity awareness has n- almost zero link to neuro inclusive behaviour. So awareness takes you nowhere.

Yes. Interesting. So, so which is why I'm very careful, and this is a change in me and how I work, in that I used to be quite happy to do neurodiversity awareness training for people, and now I'm a lot more careful about it. If there's no appetite to kind of do something with that, um, I've actually seen some instances where it's harmed people. So, um, neuro inclusion is th- this intentional change of behaviour. Um, I mean, I guess it's a bit the same if you think about people doing cultural awareness training. That awareness in and of itself doesn't necessarily change how people behave.

Yes, absolutely. I even think- Like, it just, it switches a light bulb on, but then does people's behaviour or skills or what they're actually doing, it doesn't necessarily just because of that change. That's right. Well, and often they don't know what to do with it.

Yes. Like, "Oh, I'm more aware now, but I don't know what to do." And in fact, I'm almost thinking, Sarah, the first podcast I did with you 18 months ago was almost that first awareness raising. I'm sure we touched on some suggestions as well, but it was almost the awareness raising, and now it's like, here's the sorts of things you can do with that Oh.

Oh, Sarah, this is what happened last time- I know ... I was way too matchy-matchy Yeah, I know. Um- Sorry ... so from the conversation today- Yeah ... what are the main points you want people to take away?

Mm. I think the main points is even just understanding and then being alive to, gosh, this concept of neuronormativity. We have such a, a narrow set of hidden assumptions about how we operate and how we exist, particularly in professional contexts, and that's really amplified in boardroom settings. Um, and then even just, like watch it. Um, and then just think with a bit of an experimental mindset. Um, you know, what would it feel like if we did something differently?

What would it feel like if our agenda didn't look like that? Um, if we actually thought about, you know, let's unpack it, let's have more space in it, let's, let's slow it down. Um, let's do some asynchronous work out of session. What's wrong with doing something in an asynchronous way where people can sit and digest and gather their thoughts and... So it's a little bit about permission to experiment, and being alive that, as an individual, you, you probably just accepting, uh, this is the way we do things. How does it really feel for you?

Neurodivergent or not, how does it really feel for you? Like think about the next time you exit a board meeting, do a bit of a check-in with the mind and the body. How am I actually feeling?

Most people will go, "Oh- Oh, gosh, I need a strong cup of tea, or those that drink will go, "I need a glass of wine." Um, and I need a sit down, or I just need, I need the drive home, no music. N- I just need s- or whatever it is- Yeah ... just check in.

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Be alive to it. Interesting. Okay. I'm going to try that next time. And, and the, for me, uh, the experiment that I'm going to try at the next board meeting is holding the dec- Like I say, I, I structure in breaks, but I'm going to hold the decision until after the break, which quite frankly makes me feel a bit- Yes ... uncomfortable.

Yes. Um- That is so- So I'm going to- ... good to notice though, right? Yes. I'm like, "Oh, God, no, we haven't reached the end of this until..." Anyway- Oh ... but I'm going to experiment with that, right?

Yeah. And then check in with the board about how that worked for them. Okay. So that's my action. And experimenting with silence is the other thing I'd say- Oh, yes for chairs. Yes. Don't fill it. Yes. Just experiment with it. Build it in. Yeah. Yep. Let's have- Absolutely ... a minute or two. You can dot reflect- Yes ... on your own notes if you want, whatever.

Yes. But it's so uncomfortable. We're not good with it, but that al- also is a, like a built-in break. Absolutely. That's true. Yeah. I- it's interesting on, oh, side note, and I'll come to your resource in a moment, but, uh, the, in the program that I run, the accelerator program, we, we go through this particular process. Um, and for one of the groups, for accessibility reasons, we've now built in exactly thinking time, basically, through this process where there is, we would normally take a structured 60-second break, and we now do.

So I am now going to u- test what we've done in that group for accessibility in the groups that don't need it, inverted commas, "for accessibility," but might appreciate it nonetheless. Yeah. Interesting. So great. Okay So is there a resource?

Uh, you know, you've already mentioned a couple of things. There are a few. The EY work- Yeah ... and the DCA. Yeah. But is there, is there any other resources you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Well, yes. So on my website there are a couple of good resources recently updated. So I have a neuroinclusive meeting design resource on my website that you can download, and I have a neuroinclusion, like, conversation starter document that you can download.

And the other thing that's now gone on my website is you can do a little self-reflective, interactive self-reflective survey exercise where you can kinda check your alignment with your environment from a neuroinclusion perspective, and it'll spit you out a little individualised report that says kinda, "Here's where the big gaps are for you." Um- Interesting ... "Here's, here's the areas of friction."

Ooh. And look, it's not meant to be diagnostic or anything like that. It's really a tool for self-reflection to go, "If I feel rubbish after a board meeting, what might it be?"

What might be the areas of biggest friction for me that's causing me to feel really fatigued and not so great?" Interesting. Okay, I'm going to have a play with that as well. Good. Ooh, excellent. All right. Okay. I've got some homework to do. Thank you. And I, I can g- drop you a link to the EY study and a few other resources if you want to put them- That would be great ... in the show notes. That would be lovely.

Yeah. Thank you. Awesome. Okay. Oh, Sarah, thank you. Thank you for, you know, coming on 18 months or so ago. Yeah. Thank you for being open to the- So good ... chat on LinkedIn saying, "Hey, why don't we have another chat?" And when you've got this Churchill done, I look forward to- Woo-hoo ... having a further chat again.

Oh, fingers crossed. Fingers crossed. Exactly. Yeah. Exactly. Okay. Thank you so much.

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