

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 241



Transcript – Can you thrive at work? Susan MacKenty Brady has ideas on how to do just that

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Susan Brady, about leadership trends and what that might mean for the boardroom.

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 unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and I pay my respects to elder's past and present and any First Nations people that might be listening today, I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters, Sky and culture. I stand in solidarity with First Nations people for reconciliation for voice, treaty and truth.

Now, let me tell you about Susan. Susan was previously on the board of Strong Women Strong Girls a not-for-profit organisation. And she today is the CEO of Wall Street Journal best-selling author and speaker about respect as a leaders ultimate catalyst for accountability inclusivity and results. I'm sure we'll delve into that. As the founding CEO of the Simmons University Institute for inclusive leadership. She holds the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Chair for Women and leadership, where she teaches leadership teams how to create cultures of respect. Susan is the coauthor of The Wall Street Journal bestseller, "Arrive and Thrive: 7 Impactful Practices for Women Navigating Leadership, and a whole host of other books, The Inclusive Leader's Playbook, Mastering Your Inner Critic, and The 30-Second Guide to Coaching Your Inner Critic. Her appearances include Good Morning America on ABC TV, Bloomberg, BusinessWeek, Forbes and Inc Magazine. And now also the Take on Board podcast. So welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Susan.

Susan Brady 1:34

Hi Helga, it's so fun to be here. Thank you for having me,

Helga Svendsen 1:38

Susan, it's so awesome to have you here. And for us to be able to delve into you know, some of those leadership trends and what that will mean for people in the boardroom. But of course, first, before we do that, I would like to delve a little bit deeper about you. So tell me, Where were your parents born? And where are your ancestors from?

Susan Brady 1:56

Well, my parents were born both sort of on the eastern seaboard of the United States of America, one in New York City and the other in a suburb outside of New York City in the state of New Jersey, and their parents. One was from the Missouri area in the United States and the others came a couple generations prior from places like the United Kingdom and Ireland and Scotland and Viking country.

Helga Svendsen 2:25

Well, as you might guess, with the surname Svendsen, some of my people are from Viking country as well, from just over the way there was probably some pillaging and stuff between your people and my people in years gone by centuries gone by.

Susan Brady 2:38

I like to think from Celtic goddesses and Gods you know, that came that a way.

Helga Svendsen 2:43

That's a much nicer way of thinking about it. So, where were you born? Where did you grow up, but tell us about your family and siblings and some of those early experiences.

Susan Brady 2:53

So I was born in the state of Connecticut and the region of New England, we call it in northeastern Matt states and was raised on the island of Martha's Vineyard, which is a small island off the coast of Cape Cod and Massachusetts, about 100 square miles 21 miles long, and our indigenous native people are the Wampanoag legs. And we have changed many names over my lifetime of towns and created a lot of corrective connection points with our Wampanoag tribes there. And it's kind of neat to hear you open the way you did, because in a small island community that needed to happen a long time ago, and it didn't.

Helga Svendsen 3:39

The acknowledgement of countries actually a relatively new thing, I think, in well, relatively new in that it's probably become very common over the last 10 years, that it's done pretty commonly in meetings. It's a common opening these days, but it's pretty new. Given how long Australia has been colonized for, it's pretty, it's a pretty new practice, but I do like it. So how many languages do you speak?

Susan Brady 4:02

Only one? And I have great, I don't know, I don't have an embarrassment about it. But I'm definitely aware that that is a privilege to just speak one language. And also, it's not something I'm too proud of like my intention is to learn more language.

Helga Svendsen 4:18

Yeah, I am also a single language person. I wish I'd learned more languages when I was younger. I think it's much easier when you're younger. And so where do you feel your home is?

Susan Brady 4:29

It's such a beautiful question. I mean, right now, I'm definitely on a journey of coming home to myself given different transitions of life that happened with the maturity of just growing older and launching children and changing relationships and home if it's a physical environment is probably the island of Martha's Vineyard, particularly Edgar town, which is a downed Island, whaling town where I grew up, and it's I feel like I'm there when I'm there, and I'm meant to be there.

Helga Svendsen 5:04

Isn't that extraordinary or maybe not extraordinary? I don't know. But that, you know, it's often where we grew up in our childhood is our place. That's where we feel most at home and in ourselves.

Susan Brady 5:13

But I live outside of the Boston area in Boston, Massachusetts in a town called Needham, which I also called my home.

Helga Svendsen 5:20

What's the town called? Needham. Oh, lovely. Oh, fabulous thank you for letting me dig around in some of the background. Now, let's turn to our topic for today. Leadership trends, you've written a load of books, you're the CEO of a Leadership Institute, you know a lot about this area. Let's imagine you've got the audience of a number of board directors, let's say who might be listening in today. If you had the audience, what would you really want them to know?

Susan Brady 5:50

Well, it is a really complicated time to lead any organisation. It's complicated, and there's a lot of cultural inflections, I've narrowed it down to my top 10. But if I may, I'd love to just give an overview of some of how leaders are being impacted. And what we're hearing and seeing today about what leaders need to do about all this complexity. So number one, I'm gonna just speed through these. And there's a new working paradigm, we're still in a post pandemic organisational life. That's hybrid ish. So employees want freedom and choice and to feel valued in getting that right, knowing where to set the boundaries is really tricky business. The second is cancer culture. And particularly, this might be a little American ethnocentric, but I don't think it is. Men in particular have less margin for error. Leaders are on edge and paralysed. There's a lot of judgment and not enough grace and generosity. And when 60% of men admit to backing away from women's equality efforts since hashtag me too, we know we've got more fear than maybe could, then is really helpful for progress for Equity and Inclusion. The third trend we're seeing is I love how companies named these change efforts are synergizing. We're transforming, we're aligning, it's project alignment, which means how for people who lose their jobs, you know, organisations are overhauling business structures to better meet demands of market and compete, which means change, change and more change. Certainly the way we think about diversity in organisations, and in corporate America, for sure is a little bit under attack right now. politics, social agendas, people's deeply, deeply held opinions about their own identity. And what's right and wrong is coming right into the workspace. I've seen an unseen differences. This is the six of bound and leaders need to skilfully navigate the dimensions of difference, and very few people know how to skilfully do this. We also see a lack of feedback and a presence of more and more conflict. So that's tricky in a world where we know that women already get less feedback and underrepresented populations do as well, mental health issues are remain on the rise, anxiety, depression, our Surgeon General in the United States published a report on loneliness, saying it's the biggest epidemic coming out of the pandemic era that we need to pay attention to. Another trend is around reactivity, judgment, positional thinking, this is my jam. So I'll come back to this one about just be moment to moment behaviour, and then empathy, fatigue, it's like whiplash, and it goes like this. I care about, you know, do your job. So those kinds of realities are contextually present for leaders, and in a world that people do want to feel seen and cared for. But what we're thinking about a lot is how do we thrive in this context? How will we prepare current and future leaders to live work and thrive? And how will you as board members as leaders thrive in this context? So it all boils down to we're asking our leaders to build a culture of excellence and to build a community of caring and those two things are really challenging.

Helga Svendsen 9:11

I imagine as you are reeling off all of that, I'm like, Uh huh, yeah. Uh huh. Uh huh. And I imagine everyone listening much the same. So, yeah, culture of excellence and a culture of caring and then knock up against each other. And that happens in the boardroom, too. Right? Boards are trying to have the oversight of organisations who have oversight, as you said before of that, the empathy fatigue, it's like, oh, I care about you now. Get on and do your job.

Susan Brady 9:34

Yeah, we have to achieve our business results. And emotional contagion is a thing if I exude anxiety while I'm trying to achieve business results. Or if I exude doubt or frustration or stress, or just overwhelmed, that permeates and impacts the people around me. You know.

Helga Svendsen 9:53

Okay, what's the sacred thing? What's the answer, Susan? As a board, remember, I'm listening to isn't going Yeah, absolutely. It's so complex, it's so difficult. And we need to do all of these things at once. What's the magic?

Susan Brady 10:08

Look, I hope to be a voice among many to normalize what it means to really pay attention to our thinking and feeling so that we can be intentional about what we say and do. And lucky for us humans, there's a space between what we think and feel and what we say and do. What it entails is becoming really aware, really conscious of what I refer to my colleagues and I refer to as our best self, at what moments, am I activating on my strengths, my unique strengths, feeling called to add value for those strengths. So my strengths are being appreciated, and I'm experiencing vitality, you know, those are moments when I'm probably going to be in my best self zone, I'm probably going to have better impact, especially if I can be in my best self and honour you while you're in your best self, which means I'm not trying to compete for position, I'm not trying to be better than you. And I'm not feeling small, because you're so fantastic, I actually get to feel pretty darn good about what I bring to the table, and really respect you and what you bring to the table at the same time. So when I'm aware of when that is happening, help somebody become aware when that isn't happening. And that's where we get into all the trouble interpersonally at work, and that is when we make ourselves small and then resentful, and then march off under the steam of our own magnificence or just in futility. Because why matter nothing will change around here. Or conversely, lash out or say or do something that we regret, right. So this all is in the container of grey, greater self awareness and greater self management. And I think we're asking people who haven't thought a lot about that about how they show up. potentially even people who have arrived at a point in their life where they work darn hard, and they are in a position of power and privilege to rethink how they show up. Because it's deeply impacting how people feel valued, how people want to be making a contribution,

the success of which five, almost five generations can play together in the workforce. And these have real implications of getting work done, effectively,

Helga Svendsen 12:26

That self awareness of that space between thinking and doing. And again, that often knocks up against those who have power and privilege. And boardrooms are often full of those people. boardrooms often have those people who have led organisations previously who have power and privilege. Not all the people in the boardroom is, but often they are. And they know exactly how things are done. You know, it's just getting on and doing it, isn't it? If I'm in a boardroom, and I can see around me there is not this self awareness, because often that happens in groups of people coming together to do the deep thinking, like, what should happen in the boardroom. Let's say, I'm doing pretty well on my own self awareness. And maybe this is just my own blind spot as well. But let's just imagine I'm doing okay, on my self awareness, but the people around me are not, what's your advice to me in the boardroom as to get in that space for these conversations that are not polarizing, that are constructive and deep? What's your advice to those board members that might find themselves in that situation?

Susan Brady 13:28

What you're talking about, to me is inspiring positive impact by modelling positive impact. And the way I coach senior leaders to enable this is first practice, practice it themselves. So hey, guys, I'm not in my best self. So here's what I know enables my best self, I didn't get enough sleep last night, or I'm delayed on a deadline because I've emergency came up, I whatever it is, right, you own it, you name it, you become the person who is conscious of their own sort of energy. And that gives you when you do that, it gives you permission to say, hey, you know what, Sarah, I know that you are so fantastic. Every time I've seen your present, and you're always together, and you seem to kind of out of sorts today, you didn't seem like you're in your best self tell me what's going on? And are there any blockers to your best self that I could help remove? Or are there any enablers that I could help create? Because you shine when you're rockin and rollin, right? So it's a positive message. And it's modelled in a language that is strengths based. So as soon as positive intention, that's how I do it. And even at the board level, if we can talk a little bit about this, if we reserve space to talk about how our business results, those are absolutely connected to how your population of people is feeling about going to work each day. Am I making a contribution that's valued? Am I being valued for that contribution? And do I feel like I'm learning and growing? So matters?

Helga Svendsen 14:56

Yeah, totally. And we often hear about tone from the top and the board needs to show that culture that they're expecting in the organisation. Okay, so individuals can make a difference in that by modelling it themselves by and prompting it, I guess is what I'm hearing and others

Susan Brady 15:14

Every board member, and this is not it's irritating to me still that we call this soft skills because there's nothing soft about them. If I could wave my magic wand, I would like board members to ask their CEOs and the senior executive team individually, how do you enable sort of being in your best self so that you're having the kind of impact you're proud of, and you feel great about because I need you to feel great about your contribution at work? I need you to feel great about the people around us contribution at work. And then are there any blockers to that, that I can help you with?

Helga Svendsen 15:43

As you can say, I'm jotting that down you can see that Susan, people listening to this right now can't, because it's a lovely set of questions for all sorts of things. I facilitate a lot of workshops, or do a lot of coaching, when and how are you your best self? And what are the blockers to that? Some great questions in any format really, individually with friends, whatever it may be, so I love it. I've jotted it down, thank you,

Susan Brady 16:05

I tend to agree I've changed my language around this. For a lot of us, what gets in the way is our own inner critic, either the voice in our head that's contemptuous or frustrated, and others, or the one that's contemptuous or frustrated, or judgey of ourselves, we spend a lot of time thinking in ways that are frankly not helpful for the two things I think leaders are mainly asked to do, which is creating these cultures of Excellence in Accountability and goal achievement, while at the same time creating a culture of caring and community.

Helga Svendsen 16:36

So it's interesting, you've touched on the inner critic there as well, like, I imagine for some board members in some and a whole range of leaders that the holding the purpose around excellence and performance, and all of those sorts of things is pretty common. That's you know, that's what boards do, we have oversight, and we make sure the company is performing and so on. But that culture of caring and community is less common. And I imagine for some leaders, whether they're in the boardroom, whether they are working with colleagues, whether they're called leaders or not those people I imagined some find it a bit courageous to talk about caring, and community. And I imagine that sometimes that little inner critic might hold them back from that, what's your advice to them to step into that step into that space that is so important to make sure that performance is happening? It just doesn't happen by magic. It only happens if we have this culture of caring and community as well. What's your advice to step into that space, that might feel a bit scary?

Susan Brady 17:39

So I just want to remind everyone, that leadership is a social construct, it's a relationship. And so if it's a relationship, if you believe me that leadership is a relationship between individuals that have to make decisions and understand complex problems and are paid at the most senior levels for judgment, we're going to have to come in concert with and connect with other human beings. And that that experience is a subjective experience based on our own experiences, education background, where we call home, what language we learned, our religious background. And so we're having high level business conversations with people who are fundamentally very different from us, even if we identify as the same gender or maybe the same race. And so I think what's so important is to keep a frame of mind when you think something about the caring conversation about the connection, conversation, emotional contagion, criticism, culture, scores, engagement scores, anything that's people related, I think it's helpful to just remind yourself that leadership is relationship and relationship requires empathy, and caring. And so we can't actually just cast this aside and just talk numbers. And we have to pay attention to the whole person.

Helga Svendsen 18:59

I'm wondering then as well, you talked about one of the complexities before being the new working paradigm in the hybrid world. And you know, boards are meeting hybrid teams are meeting hybrid, sometimes people work fully, remotely. What's your advice in building that connection, those relationships in the hybrid world? Because I feel like it was almost easier either when we're all online, or we are all together, but the hybrid world is particularly tricky. So what's your advice there in in building that

Susan Brady 19:25

First, I completely agree with you. My nightmare is a meeting where half the meeting is in person and half the meeting is right where I want to make sure everybody's I don't even know where to look, you know. So I would say number one, naming it you guys have for you are not here and half of you are here and then coming up with ways to ensure that the people not in the room who are usually disadvantaged in some way can be in the room because there's group connectivity when we're all physically together. I find that there's an advantage also being online because I can do to them and kind of connect with people in writing the way I could never do in person, unless, you know, you go back to second grade and pass notes. So I think naming it is one way. And I think mixing it up is another. So I think it's okay to call for, hey, we're going to do everything online for this next meeting. And then I'm going to ask those of you who can just come on in because I want to be together physically. And so part of it is having the boldness to honour the differences. Also mix it up, I have a completely remote team that decided to stay remote after the World opened back up again. And we were able to hire in different areas, and you know, do all sorts of things. And were completely remote. So it has some challenges. One of the ways that I think what we've learned, particularly around women, so a good amount of our research is around the gendered world in which we live, is that women thrive, when they have more agency over where, how, what they work,

right. And so keeping that in mind, as a population that I think is wildly underutilized the world over from a leadership and work perspective, intellectual perspective, you've seen the stats, I think this is remedy Apple is getting a little more flexible with, with where we work and how we work.

Helga Svendsen 21:18

It would be better if we hadn't have had a pandemic to create this. But the hybrid world of flexibility around work is the sorts of things that women, women at work have been talking about for decades. And bang, we now have it. And hopefully, we'll get to keep it you do every now and again, see the generally male CEOs of the world saying everyone must come back. And it's like, really? Why? Actually, I was I've met with some people. I had a board meeting yesterday, actually in person. And I walked into the office, and I went, Wow, it's so quiet in here. And the CEO and the company secretary both went, Yeah, not many people come in on it was a Monday, not many people come in on a Monday, it's great. I come in and get work done. As I say it's Monday. Yeah. And for them, it was like in the olden days, pre pandemic, you would say, Oh, I've got some deep work to do. I'm going to work from home. Now, I would say it was the complete opposite. Because at home, everybody's at home now. And they're like, I've got deep work did on going to the office, because there'll be nobody there and I can get into the office...

Susan Brady 22:16

I can come into the office on Friday. Isn't that awesome?

Helga Svendsen 22:21

Exactly. So yeah, so I think the Hubbard way of working is here to stay. I think it's a great thing that it's here to stay. And I love just that naming it like we none of us have really worked out how to do it best yet, because it's still relatively new, we're all still working it out. So just say, Hey, we're still working it out. Let's see how we can get the best out of this.

Susan Brady 22:41

And by the way, if employers decide that they need to use their corporate real estate, and governance decides that we're going to ask our people to come back in, let's just be sure to create the structures that are needed by our different populations to really thrive in that working context. So here are all the things we've been able to get done. When you come in, we've got a couple of new services that really enable you to still move your body or to childcare at work, whatever it is, I've seen post offices and all sorts of things to just help recognize that it takes me an hour to get to work an hour to get home and in between. That means I have no flexibility to do anything I'm normally able to do when I work from home.

Helga Svendsen 23:18

Oh, Susan, so much wonderful stuff in here about like I say, you know, a wealth of stuff around leadership and the leadership trends and advice to board members so much in here. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Susan Brady 23:33

Well, thank you for asking the question. Thank you for having me. I really, really hope that people take time to think about their thoughts and feelings and how they're coming across. I think there is more reactivity in the world. That breeds a lot of misunderstanding and conflict. It also is becoming more positional, you know, right, wrong, thinking in a world where we need intellectual humility in a lot of the spaces we play, like I can't possibly see everything clearly from where I sit, so I need to learn more than know. So I think it might be that the intellectual humility to Thank gosh, I might not be clear about how I'm coming across. And I would just also remind leaders, particularly at the board level, the more powerful you are, the less people are going to tell you the truth and the harder they will laugh at your jokes. You heard it here first. So it's, it's even more incumbent upon us to check in and see, hey, I want to make sure I'm coming across the way I want. Last but not least, there is a gap. For all of us. Even those of us who try really hard and write books and research and practice, try to walk our talk. There is a gap between our espoused desired behaviour and our actual behaviour. There's a gap so mind it, mind that gap, be aware of it.

Helga Svendsen 24:55

Oh, that is excellent advice. Is there a resource you would like to share with your Take on Board community?

Susan Brady 25:03

Well, sure, you know, I'm excited to have the inclusive leadership.com as our primary URL if you want to see some of our other reports, we offer events and workshops and then arrive and thrive.com arrive and thrive was my last book I co authored with two brilliant women. On seven impactful practices for women navigating leadership, we interviewed many board members, and Indra Nooyi, the former chairman of PepsiCo is wrote the foreword to that book, a lot of great insights there. So primarily those two websites, and certainly contact me directly if I can be of any help

Helga Svendsen 25:36

Oh, that is fabulous. Thank you. We will make sure there's links to all of those in the show notes and maybe your LinkedIn, is that the best way for people to get in touch with you? Absolutely. Yes. We'll make sure there's a link to that in the show notes. Ah, Susan, thank you. Thank you for initially reaching out, and for taking the time to share your wisdom around these leadership practices and read leadership trends. And this great leadership advice with the take onboard community. I really appreciate it and I'm sure others will too. So thank you for being here today.

Susan Brady 26:08

Well, thank you for having me. I hope it's useful for your listeners.

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