

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 219

Transcript – Wellbeing in the boardroom



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast you're hearing from me, I may have mentioned previously that I recently completed a certificate in wellbeing in the workplace. As part of that professional development, I completed a project. And because I don't have a workplace per se, it's really just me and Mungo that cat. And because I do so much work with boards, as well as being in the boardroom, myself, I thought, well, let's do something a little bit different. So my project was about wellbeing in the boardroom. So today, I'm going to take you through that project, I took a small group of board chairs and took them through the Wellbeing Framework. And then together, they identified some things that they would do in the boardroom to improve wellbeing. The group came back together again three months later to report back on progress. So today, I'll take you through what we did.

Note that the group spent three hours together. So this is obviously just a summary of our conversations. Having said that, I'm considering running this program, again, for the Take on Board community. So if that's something that you'd be interested in, let me know.

So let's start with the story. As part of our project, we had to do a showcase presentation of our project of just a couple of minutes. So let's kick off with part of the story I did for my showcase.

Once upon a time, boardrooms, were no fun. Every day boards were having serious discussions about serious things, finances, risk, compliance, sometimes it discussed people and how their people were doing. But they rarely discussed how they were doing. They were too serious for that. It was more important to know how the business was doing. One day, the chair of the board came to the meeting. And she started the meeting by going around the table and asking everyone to share something that had made them smile this week. And because of that, people smiled more. And because of that, people connected more. And ever since that day, the boardroom has felt just a little less serious, a little more human. And those human connections have meant that the board have made better decisions. The end.

If only it were so easy. So let's take a step back. And I'll take you through the framework for wellbeing that this group worked on the framework for wellbeing.

And in fact, just a note, wellbeing is not just about feeling good. It's actually about functioning effectively. So that's the equation: wellbeing = feeling good plus functioning effectively. And the Wellbeing Framework that we used as part of this training was the PERMAH framework. Some of you might be familiar with some of this from the work of Martin Seligman, which is PERMA without an H. This one is PERMAH with an H, PERMAH.

P stands for Positive emotions. Feeling good broadens our minds and builds our mental, physical and social resilience.

E stands for engagement. Developing our strengths can improve our levels of energy, our confidence and performance.

R stands for relationships, feeling safe with others boosts trust, creativity, learning and connection and it also lowers stress.

M stands for meaning positively impacting others elevates our motivation, our commitment and our satisfaction.

A stands for accomplishment. Believing we can improve our abilities moves us beyond our limitations to realize our potential.

H stands for health, how we eat, how we move, how we recover, and how we rest shapes our mental, physical and social energy.

So in the introductory session with a small group of chairs, and I should say I chose chairs, and I chose to focus on chairs of boards, because let's face it, they have a bit more control really over the dynamics in the boardroom. And this was something about the dynamics of the boardroom. So I really wanted to focus on chairs of boards.

So in the session, I took the group through each of these elements through the PERMAH framework, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and health. And we talked about maybe which parts of the framework was supporting or could be supporting the wellbeing of their boards right now. And which behaviors were in place or could be in place that could contribute to increasing these PERMAH factors. And we talked about what barriers might get in the way and how we can overcome those barriers. I encourage them to consider how these factors impact in the boardroom and how they're out. actions as chair could contribute to building positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and health. Once I'd taken them through the framework, and they had a better understanding of what it all meant, we then turned to them identifying what they could do with this. I started with sharing what became a bit of a mantra in our training. The quote from Professor Professor BJ Fogg, "when it comes to caring for our wellbeing tiny, is mighty". If you haven't had a look at the work of Professor Fogg, his work on tiny habits, take a look. It's really great. It's very practical, and well, tiny, which is also good for time and attention, poor busy people. So in the first session, again, in this introductory session, the group of chairs were asked to share in the boardroom, are there any perma factors that are not where you would like them to be right now? Secondly, they were asked to consider, is there a tiny wellbeing behavior you'd like to begin playfully experimenting with to improve on this factor? And thirdly, they asked themselves, how can you make sure this tiny wellbeing behavior starts to happen regularly.

So essentially, they chose one of the PERMAH factors to focus on and came up with some experiments. So what did they decide to do? There were six chairs as part of this pilot group. One of them decided that to focus on building positive emotions, and that she would do that by introducing a what made me smile this week, as part of the opening of the meeting. The next chair, who will name 'P', decided to focus on engagement. And we'll do that by connecting to our purpose through site visits, and client stories. The third chair 'J' was focusing on health by getting the EAP provider to run an education session on wellbeing for the board. The fourth chair 'K' was working on engagement and meaning by calling on those who speak up less and asking them to contribute. She was going to talk to them prior to meetings to give them a heads up to help make this happen. The fifth chair 'M' wanted to build on positive emotions, engagement and relationships by introducing a new agenda item, which invites board members to give positive feedback to another board member. And the sixth chair, 'M2' because we had two M's wanted to focus on building meaning by asking all board members to reflect and share what excites them for the organisation for 2023.

It was an incredibly positive discussion. Maybe it was always going to be when you're talking about wellbeing? I don't know. But of course, the proof is in the pudding. How did they go? Well, the group came back together again three months later to report back on their actions. And let's hear some of it from them about how they went. First up, let's hear from Penny Map, the chair of the footpath library. And just a reminder for context. Penny's focus was building engagement by connecting to our purpose through site visits, and client stories. Let's hear from Penny.

Penny Mapp 8:19

So I've introduced a few different things. So first up, because we've got a mix of virtual and in-person meetings, especially because we've got an interstate board member, but also being mindful of people being busy, but making the most so we have every quarter. So our in-person decided to make those ones in-person. We'd have an informal lunch afterwards. So we've had our first which is great. Unfortunately, we went a little bit over with a board time. And we realised, yeah, a number couldn't stay for very long. So we ended up chatting informally around the board table about a couple of matters instead of rushing and having a very quick lunch. But hopefully next time we can safeguard that time a little better. But it was good. I also at that meeting, being an in-person one I did do around the table ask everyone was and it was interesting the things that came up that otherwise wouldn't have come up. So that was really lovely having that personal interaction and response, you know, as far as especially in a new board member just getting to know each other a bit. And we've been working on buddying up to going out to actual services. We have one board member who still actually hasn't been to service it was you know, COVID made that difficult. We shut things down. And then we also were very guarded about who could go in, but need to sort of shoehorn him in a little bit to make sure he does because I think, you know, to that point of feeling like you're actually part of that process that, that good feeling you get from appreciating the work that we're doing, all the work we do in the boardroom, actually out insitu, as well as another opportunity to catch up amongst ourselves. So that is a work in progress. But I feel confident it will fall into place over time as far as... the good thing is one of our board members going to Melbourne quite regularly. So she's keen to, when she does hers section should go out with Raj, she's a board member in Melbourne. So yeah, we're just sort of all thinking about how best we would do that and have those extra opportunities to catch up with each other.

Helga Svendsen 10:34

And next participant wants to remain de-identified. For her. Her focus was on building engagement and meaning by calling on those who speak up less and asking them to contribute, she was going to talk to them prior to meetings to give them a heads up. So that would help make it happen. And here's what she reported back. "Initially, I was looking at engagement. But I actually ended up pursuing positive emotions because on reflection, it was more of a tiny nudge. And it was what had been missing for me in past meetings because I was so anxious about one particular individual. So I went in smiley and upbeat, not necessarily feeling it because I'd been unwell the week before with a nasty cold. But I went in full of praise for what I myself had achieved, and others as well, it made such a difference. Whilst we still had some challenging issues to discuss, there was a lot of light in the room, room being well, we're on Zoom. But midway through, I was actually feeling positive, I savoured the good, I stressed less. And one of the junior quieter colleagues spoke up about a sensitive topic at the end making a terrific contribution. I trusted myself and my colleagues and my allies, I might have thrown a teensy bit of engagement in there just by the very nature of some of the items on the agenda. But I'm really happy. So there it is, it worked. And I think everybody really needed that. Because we've had a couple of my own kind of brutalizing experiences in previous meetings, I realised everybody was looking to me to see what tone I was going to set. And I probably didn't realise that they were looking to me. So it just worked on so many fronts. And I'm just feeling

more generally that I can be the leader that they want, if that makes any sense. I can't believe how this little thing just me going in pretending to feel really good and upbeat and asking, Hey, how you doing? And by the middle of the meeting, I actually felt that way. I really did. I still have a sticky note by my desk that says positive emotions. It's really stuck with me." That's the end of the report. From 'K'.

I'm back to being me now. She actually sent me an email after the meeting, reflecting much of what you've just heard. And you can even hear through the email just how much of an impact it had on her and therefore her boardroom. Our third report is from Dominique Hes, who is the chair of Greenfleet. Note that unfortunately, it cuts out just before she finishes, but I'm sure you get the idea. And as a reminder, Dominique's project was focusing on building positive emotions by introducing what made me smile this week as part of the opening of that meeting.

Dominique Hes 13:25

So, Dominique Hes here Chair of the Board of Greenfleet. I thoroughly enjoyed the PERMAH framework that Helga taught us. And she challenged us to try one of these activities in the boardroom to see if it had an impact on the quality of engagement and sense of energy and positivity within the boardroom. So I had planned to do an activity, which was something good that happened that week. But at the board meeting, we didn't end up being able to do any of that because there were some urgent matters that needed to be resolved before people had the peace of mind to really be present to an activity like that. So I made the call to not do it, that board meeting and we ended up doing it at the AGM. But instead of at the AGM, saying what was something good that happened that week, I asked everybody on the board as we went around the table, including the executive at the table, to mention something that was inspiring, uplifting, memorable from that past year with Greenfleet. And the stories that came through and the energy that came through and just the sense of being together as a community.

Helga Svendsen 14:43

So folks, as I say, unfortunately, this is cut out but Dominique went on to say that this activity brought meaning to everyone on the board. And it was amazing and lovely, and as she said, really brought a sense of being together as a community. Next up We're hearing from Molly George, who at the time was the acting chair of the YWCA in Australia, and is currently back in her deputy chair role.

Molly George 15:09

So last time, I said that the meeting that I was going to chair as acting chair, it was to ask people in our in camera, what excites them about where the wire is at and what they look forward to into 2023. And I did that. At first, I wrote down all the responses, partially because they were great. And

partially because it gives me a really strong indication as to where everybody's at and what they focus on a board. I think it was also good, because we started off with something that was sort of talking about something that was joy, basically, we were excited about, I got really good feedback on it from everybody else. So at the end, I sort of I gave everybody a heads up that I was going to ask for some feedback as chair. And they all said that they loved doing that, that they sort of put them in a headspace of like, you know what they're excited about, but then that sort of thought about that throughout the meeting when we were making decisions, which I think made a really big difference. So what am I going to do next with that? Well, that's really interesting, given that I'm not the chair anymore, but I'm still vice chair. And in that I've sort of it's my second year in the role, and I said, but I think I need to sort of be more involved in like the leadership as chair. So I'll chair a couple of meetings this year, and also have more frequent meetings with the CEO and things like that. And I think it's really trying to work out how I take this as a part of my my cheering style into using that as my strength. And then also using that to help myself make decisions and be feminine, because I think the one thing that I've sort of am realizing at the board table that I can easily play the role of a diplomat, because I'm a natural people pleaser, which can be really challenging when you sit on a board. And I sort of had a conversation with the CEO last week, where she sort of basically asked for my support on something about her where her time is spent at the next impasse and board meeting in a couple of weeks time, which made me really think about okay, well, actually, where am I sitting on certain decisions? Where am I deciding? I'm not just playing the diplomat? Because we want to please, people on the board, and where are we pushing that? And I think it's like working with this style of how can we be excited and positive and labored that and also still make difficult decisions? Yeah, I think that'll be an interesting journey for me and kind of going into that playing more of a role in the leadership of the board will be interesting.

Helga Svendsen 17:36

And then for me, because I was part of the group as well. So for me, I was focusing on positive emotions. And one thing I did as chair was to start meetings with 'what's made you smile this week?' In fact, if you've been in workshops or events with me, you know that I liked using this for other events as well. And I think the first time I did it, the people in the room thought, well, it was probably a bit weird. But it changed the energy in the room for the better.

For me, also, as a board member, I've asked for breaks in virtual meetings. So we can stretch our legs, which is part of the health aspect of PERMAH. And I've also gone for walks with board members to connect, which is both about health, but also engagement and relationships. Personally, I always try to meet new board members. And in one instance, a board member joined our board during COVID. So we've kind of turned into this... we kind of had his board blind date, where I met her at the swings in the park and then went for a walk. And it was so lovely that we've continued the practice of working together. We sometimes talk about board stuff. And sometimes we just talk. And whenever I join a new board, I make sure I have a cup with each of my new board colleagues. And indeed, if I'm on the board and new people join, I always reach out to them as well, because, well, let's just say relationships are important to me.

Now one other thing that one of my boards did recently, we had an all day planning session, and I was asked to facilitate a session at the end of the day, just to connect. So I asked my colleagues to bring some pictures or objects that gave an indication of why you are who you are. This was such a beautiful session. It was amazing to see that things that people brought along with them. We had war medals. We had photos with international criminals. Yes. We had plectrums from people who were the musicians in the room. We had cards from kids, we had photos, it was amazing. I'd only brought photos and I felt seriously under done by some of my colleagues who had brought with them all of these incredible artifacts. So we not only deepened relationships, we also shared a bit of a meaning to it was great. Hats off to our chair for being open to it. And for the board for diving in with such gusto.

So there it is. Wellbeing in the boardroom, if it's an not something you're paying attention to right now, you might want to consider how PERMAH: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning accomplishment and health can make your boardroom more effective.

So again, folks note, this was just a summary of our conversation, we spent a number of hours together. And this was just a summary of some of what we talked about some of what they agreed to do. And of course, the feedback from that. And again, as I said earlier, I am considering running this program again for the Take on Board community. So if it's something that you might be interested in, please get in touch and I'll let you know if and when I get that up and running. If I don't still use what I've talked about here today to consider your board and how you might be able to introduce some of these things. Whether you're in the board chair or not. Over to you let me know how you go with wellbeing in the boardroom.

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