



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 352

# Transcript – Helga Goes Solo: The impact of kindness and niceness on boardroom effectiveness

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.

Hi folks. Today is one of the sessions with just me and I wanted to reflect on a conversation that we had at one of the Accelerator groups recently. So as many of you will know, I host a program called **Take on Board Accelerator**. Each month a group of board directors come together and we pull apart a challenge.

We share achievements. Around the topic, we share resources around the topic, and then somebody brings a challenge to the table. Now, I am not going to go into all of the details of the challenge that was brought to the table, but I did think I would just touch on some of the takeaways and some of the resources around the topic because it was.

Well, super useful for the people in the room, and I reckon it'll be super useful for you. So the topic for this month was navigating the impact of kindness and niceness on boardroom effectiveness and decision making. I'm sure that won't have happened to any of you. You know, all of your boards got the exact right balance of kindness and niceness and efficiency and getting things done and so on.

Yeah. Or maybe not. So just to. Kind of get to the end and then come back and let you know how we got there. Some of the themes that came up were niceness is about comfort. Kindness is about clarity, and that's a very Brene Brown thing. Anyone who's read a bit of Brene clear is kind, unclear, is unkind. The other thing that we touched on a lot is that niceness.

Can lead to a risk. Things are unspoken. Things are unsaid. Things are unchallenged. Things are un pulled apart, and that's exactly what boards need to do. So now let's dig into some of the experiences and resources that were shared that built around those themes. So the first round in Accelerator we do, we share some things that are going well at our board in relation to the topic.

Here's some of the things that were shared and they're all de-identified, of course. So one of the group members noted how the chair of her board had maintained her natural kindness, which is something that she had in spades. Uh. And had evolved that into being highly effective, highly efficient leader of collaborative meetings, which wasn't quite the way it was at the start.

Another member of the group shared how she was navigating a challenging dynamic with an interrogative board member who style was a bit blunt sometimes, and, well, let's just say they're having a bit of a. Crisis at the moment, and it's been interesting to watch other board members to start to soften that and together counter some of that negativity and bring a more supportive and constructive approach.

Another board member, I thought this was so interesting. Her approach is kind. She works with one of her peers in the boardroom who has a very direct approach, and between them, they often find a constructive middle ground that moves beyond simple niceness towards a more neutral, effective progress. I thought that was a really interesting way of doing it, kind of having your own little buddy to call each other out.

One of the others talked about having an informal meeting prior to the actual board meeting. Often as a opportunity to air grievances and to feel heard about what is expected, to create a more constructive, formal meeting, which I thought was a great idea as well. And another group member. Talked about the distinction between niceness, which often avoids difficult truths, whereas true kindness is about providing clear expectations and engaging in straightforward conversations.

That was also my reflection when I shared, was that, uh, one of the chairs of the boards that I have worked with has such a beautiful direct and non-judgmental way of dealing with issues, just incredible to see in action. Now the next part of the accelerated program, we share resources and we end up with this library of incredible resources.

And I wanted you to have some of these incredible resources as well. So if you go to the show notes, you'll find links to all of these. One of the, um, resources used self-compassion practices and what is self-compassion. And that group member reflected that sometimes navigating niceness and kindness can be tricky and we need to look after ourselves in that.

Another one shared. Have you heard of The Tyranny of Niceness by Tamson Clark? Another group member shared Nelson Mandela introducing the elders in Johannesburg in 2007, and. The reason she shared this was that it was about tuning into elder knowledge and about highlighting the importance of community coming together for the greater good of whole humanity.

One of the group members shared a piece by Adam Sandel, the kind. Business like Matrix, and she just loved the simplicity of it. So you might, if you want a simple matrix, you might want to have a look at that one. One of the group members shared Clear is kind, unclear, is unkind, good old Brene Brown, and kindness in the boardroom, which was shared by another person as well.

And that person reflected that the author is explaining in various forms, metaphors, and even in personal life, the difference between kind and nice and gave some classic examples, you know, spinach in the teeth, that sort of thing. One of the other group members shared the \$600 question when board oversight becomes Death by Interrogation, which was how to navigate a board member with an interrogative style.

Another why directors struggle with challenge in the boardroom and how to fix it, and she reflected that this resource talks about one of the. Cultural, I guess barriers in leadership is in avoiding tough conversations and that the idea of being nice and polite isn't being clear. You can see that there's some themes here, isn't there?

I shared, I'm sure I've talked about this before, but I shared the radical candor framework. It's one that I absolutely love. It is also a one of those two by two matrices, if that's the word. She talks about being compassionate and well, not giving a. Insert word, and then across this side being indirect and direct.

She says, when you're being compassionate and kind and delivering with care and direct, that is radical candor, and that is what you're aiming for over in this quadrant when you have high care, but indirect. She calls that, and I love this ruinous empathy. When we're being too nice to raise things and it just is.

Yeah. Ruinous empathy. I love that one. Well, I don't love the Love it in action, but I love the concept of ruinous empathy, again in the radical candor framework in the bottom left. So it's been very direct, but not delivered with much care. She calls that obnoxious aggression. Again, I'm sure that's something we may have seen, whether it's in the boardroom or outside the boardroom.

Uh, and so this framework, I think, yeah, it's just be direct. Deliver it with care and compassion, and that means you can avoid ruinous empathy. Empathy. Love it. Okay. So we then did a particular challenge. I'm not going to take you through that because, uh, well, that's for the confidentiality of the group. I will touch on some of the reflections at the end about the conversation.

So some of the things people reflected at the end that have prompted deep self-reflection on how the distinction between kindness and niceness applies in governance work. Another how it's around navigating professional discomfort, so leaning into that learning zone, leaning into that zone of discomfort sometimes to make sure that we address difficult issues directly.

Another reflected that the conversation highlighted the importance of being kind to yourself and others when managing significant complexities or personal changes. Another talked about how effective governance requires early support structures to ensure well-intentioned individuals are empowered to achieve impactful results.

Next up, a reflection around balance skills being a critical mix as a lack of experienced directors can hinder a board's operational success. Another about exploring radical candor while valuing outside directors, which provide objective non-personal. Perspectives.

Another described the distinction between kindness and niceness as a light bulb moment for her, reinforcing that her role was around governance rather than pleasing everyone and so on.

So again, you can totally see the themes that I touched on at the start. Niceness is about comfort. It often means people aren't saying what needs to be said because they want to avoid awkwardness or maintain their own comfort can lead to ruinous empathy where we care so much about not hurting other people's feelings, whether that's executive or board colleagues, that we fail to give them the feedback that they need to grow.

A second theme was kindness is about clarity. As Brene Brown says, clear is kind, unclear is unkind and kindness invokes providing straightforward conversations, clear job descriptions, clear role expectations, fair expectations, and it prioritizes the growth of the organisation over immediate personal comfort of any of the individuals in the room.

And finally, the theme about the risk of niceness. When a board's too nice, it risks falling into groupthink. It risks avoiding decisions. It risks, you know, continuing with skills gaps or not facing into critical issues like insolvency or poor performance. And that might mean that you are nice into a catastrophe because no one wanted to rock the boat.

What are some of the practical outcomes for boards? And again, I've touched on some of this, but I just wanted to package it up nice and neatly for you. You could reframe straight talk as a tool for growth. Move away from the idea that direct feedback is unkind. Instead, it is a way to help an organisation to succeed.

And if you aren't being clear. If you are not giving that straight talk, you're denying the organisation or the individual or your colleague or your peer, the chance to improve. Secondly, create brave spaces for discomfort. Effectiveness often requires sitting with discomfort. One board found success. I talked about this earlier, by holding pre-meetings specifically to air those grievances and get concerns on the table so that the formal meeting could be more constructive.

So there might be other ways you can air some of that so that the boardroom can then be the brave space for discomfort. You might use some frameworks. I love the radical candor framework. You might use Brene Brown's. Clear is kind, unclear is unkind. You might use the kindness business-like Matrix that I referred to in one of the resources there.

Finally, in managing this self-compassion and ego management is key. Uh, it was interesting actually at the recent Australian governance Summit, Ian Ham in talking about chairing a board, said something like, you know, let's just accept that we all have an ego and, because they were talking about chairing boards, and he said, and particularly if you're chairing a board, you have an ego.

The key is to manage that ego, and that comes through self-awareness and self-compassion. So navigating the dynamics of niceness and kindness can be really energy draining. It can be brain draining. You have to think about a lot. You have to practice, you have to do some of these things. So be self-compassionate for your own imperfections.

Have an awareness of when saving face or ego is preventing you from maybe making the right call in your own board practice. Alright folks, that is some of the reflections from the recent, uh, Take on Board accelerator session around niceness and kindness and the distinction. I hope you find some of those reflections, some of those go-to tools, some of those resources useful.

Let me know if you do and I can share some of the reflections from these groups a little more often, if that's helpful. Alright folks. That's it from me this week. If you want to continue the conversation, see you are over in the Facebook group. Bye for now. 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 and active group that helps supports and cheer squads each other.

Just search, Take on Board in Facebook to find us. I would 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.

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