



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 356

Transcript – Helga goes solo: Takeaways from WorkSafe Victoria event and what boards need to know

Hello, and welcome to the Take on Board podcast. I'm your host, Helga Svensson. I know that 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 navigate your way onto your first board, your next board, or to build your governance wisdom.

Now, on with the show. Hi, folks. This week, you're hearing from me, uh, about an event that I went to recently. It was hosted by WorkSafe Victoria, and it was called Hearts, Minds, and Improving Your Business. At that event, we heard from Professor Lea Waters, uh, about some of the evidence from neuroscience, positive psychology, and business studies to show what happens inside your brain and your body when you feel psychologically safe and healthy at work.

Uh, she pointed out that psychological health is a key resource worth growing in our employees, in our organisation, given it's linked to clearer thinking, improved problem-solving, higher EQ, stronger resilience, and better physical health. It was a really great event, and in fact, I sidled on up to the professor afterwards and might get her on the podcast at some stage in the future.

So why is this important for boards? It's certainly important for organisations for all the reasons I've just run through, and I will do that again. Why is it important for boards? Well, for boards, um, particularly in Victoria, psychological health is now legislatively on par with physical safety. So you've got to pay attention to it, basically.

Um, secondly, board's role is to have oversight of key risks, and just like physical safety, psychosocial safety is a key thing for boards to have oversight of. So it should be on your risk framework, your risk appetite statement, and risk register. It's just too important to leave to chance, and as I say, the new regulations in Victoria mean that you're on the hook for it, so you need to pay attention.

Before I dive on into the things she said, she started with this Little energizer activity, I guess. And I know some of you are already going, "Oh my God, don't talk about energizers. Don't talk about icebreakers. We're board directors. This is all very serious." However, sometimes literally just getting up out of your chairs can be helpful.

So she did this little activity, zip zap zop. I'm not going to run through it here. Uh, but it was a way of getting people to stand up and to move around and to engage with each other. Uh, I've probably said this before, but at one of the boards that I chair, we always start our board meetings doing a very quick around the room, sharing something that made us smile this week.

Um, and whilst it's not getting up out of the seats, maybe I'll try that next time, uh, it is a way of just, you know, getting people in the zone. So it is worth thinking about something at the start of your board meetings to get people ready for what I hope will be a robust conversation. So she then dove into the neuroscience, and she talked about psychological health versus psychological harm.

So for our brains, psychological health means creative problem-solving, means sharp and focused attention, and means clear decision-making. We feel motivated, we feel like we're on an even keel, and we feel engaged. Which means in terms of productivity, we are adaptable, resilient, and collaborative. Now, if those things are not in place, if we've got, um, psychological harm or harms in place, for the brain, that can mean impaired judgment, poor concentration, and reduced working memory.

We feel stressed, irritable, and anxious. And what that means for the way, you know, for our productivity, we're aggressive, impatient, and reactive. So you can already see that you want, you know, that psychological health, not psychological harm. What does that mean in terms of workplace outcomes? So a psychologically healthy workforce, 23% higher profitability, 18% lower turnover, higher innovation and creative input, greater job satisfaction and team morale, lower absenteeism, better client and customer relationships.

On the other side, psychologically harmful workplaces have more errors and incidents, reduced efficiency, lower productivity, increased absenteeism and presenteeism. So, not being away from work, being at work, but not really being at work. Higher staff turnover and increased conflict and poor team dynamics.

Again, you can see why this stuff is important, and it's important not just for the workplace itself, but for boards. We have oversight of these things, and if we are going to have Efficient, effective, and safe, and flourishing, and thriving organisations, we need to be paying attention to psychological safety.

So she touched on four factors, four pillars, four contributors to harm versus health, and these are the things that boards should have oversight of, in my view: work design, work management, workflow systems, and workplace environment. So what does that mean in practice? So things like work design might be ensuring adequate resourcing of projects so that people are not getting burnt out.

That's a board view. Boards need to provide the resources to do what they say they need to do in their strategic plan. In terms of work management, an example of that might be, uh, ensuring that there's no gap between the organisation's strategic values and actual behaviour. In terms of workflow systems, that might be about ensuring good communication, good clarity, and a lack of ambiguity.

And in terms of environment, it's ensuring that the physical and social environment supports that high-level brain function. It might be as simple as saying there's natural light in the room and, and the physical environment has the right light and the right design and the right way of doing things so that people can flourish at work.

The sorts of hazards that workplaces and boards need to be on the lookout for is too much tasks and demands, a lack of resources to do those tasks and demands, low control and autonomy, low communication, low clarity, and ineffective or low relationships and cultures. They're the hazards that boards need to have a lookout for.

In terms of protecting and safeguarding psychological safety, the things that... the positive side, the things that we are looking li- at having in place rather than guarding against, reasonable workloads, appropriate resources, security and support, clarity and communication, consistency and predictability, employee consultation and contribution.

So you can see a number of those are flip sides of each other. Why do we want to do this? Well, it optimizes the human brain. So for the employees individually, that's obviously useful. And what does that do? It sometimes fosters positive spillover effects. So at the team level, when individuals in- are engaged, that has a bit of an infectious, a good infectious, um, impact on the rest of the team.

And what does that mean for the organisation? Well, it increases the chance of business success. Not only does it make it a good place to work for, you're more likely to succeed. Nothing wrong with that. Win-win. Again, that is exactly why boards need to have oversight of it. She touched on some of the chemicals, brain chemicals, I guess, dopamine.

Uh, dopamine, uh, comes when we have engaging tasks, when we get feedback, when we have rewards. And if we have those things in place, we get a dopamine hit, and the dopamine hit gives us more focus and motivation, which can have, again, that, you know, a good viral effect. She also touched on oxytocin. Now, oxytocin is encouraged and increased through collegiality, through support, and through group success, so the group and the team coming together.

And what does that lead to? Increased trust and increased teamwork. And finally, she touched on cortisol. Cortisol is kept in check when there is reasonable job demands, when there are smooth operating systems and clear expectations. And when your cortisol is in check, that leads to innovation, resilience, and adaptability.

My apologies for smiling wryly when I talked about smooth operating systems. If th- personally, if there's one thing that gets my cortisol working, it's when my technology doesn't work. And that's an operating system, right? And it's an operating system for most people. So having smooth operating systems, you know, whether that's about clarity in terms of who signs off a particular thing or who's doing what, or the technology working, is really important.

So folks, I think it is worth thinking about psychological safety, and I think it's worth boards thinking about psychological safety. And some of the things that you might want to do, here's some, you know, suggested actions. One thing you can do is look at your risk register. Does your risk register, particularly in relation to people, talk about psychosocial risk as well as physical injury?

So check that. Secondly, does your, uh, risk management framework or your risk register talk about the contributors to harm versus health? Does it touch on work design, work management, workflow systems, and workplace environment? You don't need to cover them all off, but at least having some of them covered off is going to mean hopefully that you are minimizing that harm and maximizing that health.

Thirdly, I think boards want to think about the resources that they have in place to both eliminate hazards and maximize health. We really need to ensure that we are providing those resources,

whether it's budgetary or otherwise, for organisations and management to do what they need to do here. Fourthly, I want boards to think about your own psychological safety, your own, uh, way of operating, your own work design, work management, workflow systems, and your own environment.

Because for you in the boardroom, this is just as important as it is for the workplaces that you are overseeing, the businesses you are overseeing. And if you have good psychosocial health in your boardroom, you are much more likely to have robust conversations. So I think it's worth looking at it for your organisation and then turning the mirror around for you.

I'm going to give myself a little plug here. Well, the tool from Data Drives Insight. There is a tool that measures psychosocial health and psychosocial risks, uh, that I am accredited in. It's called the Team Excel tool, and it's run by Data Drives Insight. Um, I've definitely used it for boards before to measure that psychological safety in the boardroom and then had a...

led a discussion with the boardroom about where they are at. Uh, it might be something that you want to consider. Uh, we are doing it as part of the Take on Board Accelerator groups in June, so we're just about to do that assessment where they test the psychological safety of each of our groups and do a little bit of a comparison against their boardrooms.

So if it's something you would like to dive into with your boardrooms, let me know. Happy to wax lyrical about how important it is and how effective the tools are that we can use for it. Finally, folks, my final prompt for you is if you are not on the email list for whoever your workplace health and safety regulator is in your state for their events, I suggest you get on it.

I hadn't been to the one of, one of the WorkSafe events before. This was my first, and I found it really useful to go to, so you might want to make sure you're on the event list for, yeah, whoever your regulator is. Last but not least, like I said, I did sidle on up to, um, Professor Leah Waters after the event, firstly to ask whether it was okay to share some of this information, and she said it was, which was great.

And secondly, if this is something that's of interest to you, if this has piqued your interest from the conversation that I have just touched on today, let me know, and I will get in touch with her and see if we can entice her onto the podcast. Okay, folks. That is my conversation for today. I hope you found it useful.

I hope you found some tips in there that might be of value to your organisation. Let me know what you think and how you're putting it in practice in your workplace. Over and out from me. See you next week. So that's a wrap for the Take on Board podcast today. Thank you for being here and for being part of the community.

I do this podcast because I love bringing good women and gender-diverse peoples together, so I invite you to join us over in the Take on Board Facebook group, an active group that helps, supports, and cheer squads each other. Just search Take on Board in Facebook to find us. Or you might like to let me know your email address, and you'll then have the Take on Board times and the Take on Board community's digest delivered straight to your inbox.

You'll also get advance notice of events and programs so you can meet others in the community. Finally, I'd really love it if you could do some of the podcast things. Share this podcast with someone you know who you think might get some value from it. Subscribe if you haven't already, either on podcast or over on YouTube, and I also 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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