



Take on Board

# Transcript – Corrinne Armour

**Helga Svendsen 0:00**

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Corrinne Armour about fearless leadership in the boardroom and from the other side of the board table and executive perspectives. First, let me tell you about Corrinne. Corrinne is the former Deputy Chair of Wintringham and a founding chair for the Torch Project where she helped the organisation move from a project auspiced by the not for profit to an independent structure. She's a speaker, trainer and coach who helps leadership teams develop fearless leadership and delivers transformational results. Known for her energy, empathy and results focus her clients come from a range of sectors including local government. Her latest book Leaders Who Ask was released in 2018. She's also co-author of Developing Direct Reports and to specialist texts in human behaviour. Welcome to the take on board podcast Corrinne. Thank you.

**Corrinne Armour 0:50**

I'm delighted to talk to you Helga.

**Helga Svendsen 0:53**

I should also say Corrinne was my former coach and I still consider her my coach, even though I haven't had coaching sessions in quite some time. So it's kind of interesting to be talking to you this way instead of across the coaching table.

**Corrinne Armour 1:06**

I know that we're not supposed to have favourite clients to slack. We're not supposed to have favourite children, so I won't make any comment about that.

**Helga Svendsen 1:15**

So, Corrinne, it's great to have you here today. Can you tell us a bit more about yourself?

**Corrinne Armour 1:20**

I would love to say my expertise is leadership. And I help senior leaders and their leadership teams develop fearless leadership. So fearless leadership when you've got one executive team that's

aligned and fearless. Then the executive teams able to leverage that thinking diversity and access the collective wisdom of the leadership team. They're also able to model the dynamic that you want right through the organization. And that leaves us with an executive team that is setting the organization up Success.

### **Helga Svendsen 2:01**

So Corrinne before we talk about fearless leadership from the executive perspective and fearless leadership in the boardroom, we would love to hear more about you. So can you tell us about your upbringing and the lessons you learned and what you got up to and leading influences on your in your childhood?

### **Corrinne Armour 2:19**

Well, I grew up on a farm in gips land. And it's a nice almost circle back that we should be talking about this right now. Because in a couple of days time, I'm moving back there after well over 30 years, actually. So I grew up on a farm had a really free upbringing, and my parents were both very community minded. So they were both members of things. Actually, both my parents were leaders in the fruit industry. So I grew up on an apple orchard. And they were involved in everything and I think I learned a strong sense of the importance of community. The importance of if you see something and you don't like the way it is then take action. So my mum developed a lot of fairly significant initiatives. When I was in my teens and probably early 30s, she's still very active now. In fact, she has a, an Order of Australia award for contribution to the fruit industry and to community. And what I learned from both of them is the importance of community and the importance of making things happen. If something's not happening the way you want it to then do something about it and don't complain, make change happen. So they were they were very strong influences in in my life.

### **Helga Svendsen 3:43**

It's so interesting hearing this from most of my guests that I talked to and hearing those introductions and that sense of community and giving and doing something is such a common theme amongst women in the boardroom. Maybe that's unsurprising, but it seems to be a really common theme that I'm hearing from our guests, it's about connecting with people and doing something for a greater purpose than the new and your immediate family.

### **Corrinne Armour 4:11**

This could be also considered an excuse, I guess if you spin it the wrong way. But when my kids started school, I made a commitment that I would not join the boards or the the committees at school because I've always been really active in the community and there are so many people who

aren't. And I thought it's an opportunity for parents who don't already have those strong community connections to do this. And so I haven't been actively involved at all in the, in the sort of the governance and the administration of the kids schools.

#### **Helga Svendsen 4:44**

Again, for those that are listening that are been on school committees and so on. I so often hear from women, when they are thinking about getting into the governance space are I was just on school council or not. I haven't got any governance experience. You know, I was just on school Council. It's like that is governance. governing a school. You know, it's one of the most important things that can be done. So well done you for allowing that space for somebody else to take that on. fearless leadership career I know is one of your passions, why fearless leadership? Why is it important to you?

#### **Corrinne Armour 5:16**

I spent a couple of years teaching English in a refugee camp on the edge of a war zone. So I was on the border between Thailand and Burma or Myanmar, as it's called now. And I was working with Korean ethnic minority group from Burma. So I was the only foreigner for a lot of the time that I was there living in a pretty isolated jungle camp. And when you've got hundreds of thousands of people living in refugee camps around the border of a country, as you did then with Burma and still do, although not there are changes in Yemen now. So that is slowly changing in and people look at that, and most people would say That's a problem of a political problem. I don't think it's a political problem. I think it's a problem of leadership, I just so happens that that particular version of leadership is in the political sphere. And that is just a massive waste of human potential hundreds of thousands of people intergenerationally living in refugee camps. It's such a waste of human potential. And so that got me passionate and inspired to do something. So when I came back to Australia, here, we have everything we want, everyone can live up to their potential. But still, that's not the case in Australia, and certainly not destruction and waste on the scale of around the borders of Mema. And with the work I do now, moving in and out of organizations, so many people, leaders and people right through the organization and not living up to their potential, and so I'm passionate about helping individual leaders and mostly leadership teams. Be the best that they can be to live to their potential so that they can help everybody in the organization be the best that they can be.

#### **Helga Svendsen 7:09**

You're working with leadership teams to help the rest of the organization. From our perspective, what can boards do to make sure that they're making the most of the human potential in their leadership team? Because they're often the key connection? I guess, with the leadership team, from your experience? What's your advice to boards to make sure that they are maximizing that human potential?

**Corrinne Armour 7:30**

Well, each board member individually and then the board as a team, because the Board is a team, how fearless are they being? You know, are they having the conversations that need to be had? And I doing it in ways that build and not bruise, you know, so how well are they communicating informally? What's the motivations for what they do? Do they understand that about themselves? Do they understand that about each other and Are they able to work well together as a board? And what's the purpose and there needs to be really clear purpose. And interesting when I work with executive teams, the purpose of the organization is typically clear. And individual purpose is clear. So in that top level of organization, the bottom level of individual but the level in the middle of what's the purpose of this team is often less clear at an executive level than it is in a more junior operational level. And so, from a board perspective, what's the purpose of the board team. And so when we're really clear on our purpose, when we understand our motivations and the motivations of others, and when we communicate, we've got good protocols for how we communicate, and all that needs to happen in the context of trust, because trust makes everything possible. So how well is the boards individually and then as a team covering off those four domains of leadership. And if they're doing that, well, then they setting the rest of the organization up for also being fearless. And I think it's probably worth just saying here that feel us isn't a complete absence of fear. Because not the only time there's ever a complete absence of fear is when you did or didn't drink. And neither of those are terribly useful for leadership. So it's about in it, there is fear there, but it's fearing less, it's working well together. So we can feel that fear, use it as data and do what we need to do anyway.

**Helga Svendsen 9:35**

So I'm wondering, again, from your experience, working around those things that is needed in the boardroom to get the best of the leadership team to get the best of the team. Have you got any examples? I need to mention names but if you got any examples, maybe where it's either worked really well or perhaps not work so well, and then what that group has done to turn it around or even what that board has done to turn it around.

**Corrinne Armour 9:58**

Some of the things that I hear my executive clients, so I'm mostly working with executive teams, and things that they in particular, the CEO, but depending on the relationship that the board has with, with management, and it's sometimes it's most of the executive have a fairly active role in the board relationship. It's things like when the chair is tense, then that transmits so quickly to the executive team. And then when the executive teams tense if you don't have an executive team, with a high emotional intelligence that can recognize that picked up the tension from the board, and then that gets passed into the organization and it spreads like wildfire. Adam Galinsky is a neuroscientist and he coined the phrase the power amplification effect. what that's saying is that when you are in a position of power, things you say amplified things you do amplified, so if there's tension, as The

board and then that transmits to the executive team and then the executive team transmit that through the organization, it flows top down. So the more aware a board is of managing their own emotional space, then we can have good conversations. If we've got a high level of tension that's translating into perhaps behavior that's more at an aggressive rather than an assertive end. And then we have the CEO and or the executive team, feeling under threat. Now we're triggering threat response in the brain, then we're creating a neuro chemical response that is not leading to resourcefulness and it's not leading to pro social choices. It's not leading to the best ability to think through and respond to whatever the challenge is. is at hand. Whereas if we've got a board who are able to have good open conversations where everybody feels safe, regardless of whatever has been discussed, then the opposite happens and we get more oxytocin and dopamine. So, neurotransmitters that are related to more pro social choices, higher levels of trust higher levels of resourcefulness, the more effectively the board manages their own emotional state, their own stress state, the more effectively they can work creatively with the executive team. Other things I sometimes hear is that the chair is not chairing, and I'm sure you've had other guests talk about the importance of the of the chair and the role that the chair can play. But when the chair either is not stepping into their authority, and I don't mean in an authoritarian role, there is an authority that comes with the role of the chair and is not chair Or is perhaps sharing too strongly. And so there isn't sufficient conversation around the table. If one person is allowed to hijack the agenda, there are often things where I've that where the CEO will say, with just not having the conversations we need. I've got a brilliant board is fantastic people around the table, but I'm not able to access the knowledge and the skills and the experience they bring, because the conversations aren't the right conversations. And often that comes back to to the role of the chair.

### **Helga Svendsen 13:37**

The role of the chair is absolutely key in making sure the culture of the boardroom and I think what I'm hearing, therefore, is the culture of the organization operate in a positive and constructive way. I want to just swing back, you've talked before about that tension and having almost I guess, like a healthy tension in the boardroom. And often conversations in the boardroom are quite robust. And the trick, I think is to make them constructively robust rather than negatively robust for one of a better word that then people need to be able to say exactly what they're thinking and ask close questions, but not in a way that is going to cause some of the negative effects of that. But it's a really fine balance. And often, I guess the chair is key in that as well. It's a fine balance between having that healthy tension and having an unhealthy tension. What are some of the things boards can do to create that safe space and that trust that you're talking about? That helps to make sure it's positive and constructive?

### **Corrinne Armour 14:36**

Ask first and tell last. If the board ask good questions, firstly, they'll get the context they need to understand the challenge or the dynamic or the opportunity at hand. Often the context of this particular organization isn't the same context that The Board Member might experience when they're on the board of another organization. So let's say we're talking about a director who's on a

portfolio of two or three boards, the context of each is likely to be different. So if you don't ask questions, you don't get that context. Also, if we're talking about volunteer boards, you typically you've got someone who's an executive somewhere, and they're coming in they're being and they're also on your board. So without asking good questions, you're assuming context that could give you a completely different sense of how you might handle the situation than if you would at to really understand the context. So that's the first reason why should what should ask good questions. The second one is that we will often jump in with ik, right, here's what you should do. And quite often, that's the thing that the CEO or the executive team has already tried. So we're wasting time hearing your suggestion that actually has already been tried and bought meetings like any other meeting has a limited time. So let's not have conversations that are redundant. Let's have useful conversations. And then the third reason for asking good questions is that we can work out what's the best conversation for us to have around this challenge. So if board members ask a few good questions, then sometimes the need for that in a robustness in inverted commas goes away, because we're just having really good open conversations. And we're understanding more, the more you do to build trust, then the more we can have those tough conversations as well. So there's two levels of trust that are really important. One is the level of trust within the board team. So how well does the board work together? And I will sometimes work with boards. If I'm doing a 12 month program with the executive team. Then quite often they'll say can we do an extra day For the board, and sometimes that's about helping the board to understand the journey that the executive teams on. And often it's about the board need some of these skills as well. I'm guessing maybe sometimes it's dressed up to have the board there to understand the journey the organization is on as the role of a host, your role is to make guesses.

**Helga Svendsen 17:24**

No name spaces. Right.

**Corrinne Armour 17:26**

Yes. So where were we talking about? How do we have those robust conversations? So firstly, ask more questions. Secondly, build trust. And thirdly, if you want to have a robust conversation, issue a challenge, what's your motivation for that? And it is your motivation for that because you desperately believe based on now a full understanding of the context and the actions that have been taken so far, that this is the best course of action, or are you defending something that was a position you've had for something Time, or an action that you've taken or you've seen others taken in the past, we so often, when the energy rises in a conversation, the motivations aren't always pure. So for each director to just check in on, what's my motivation here? Why am I wanting to push this particular argument? And then have it with that knowledge that, you know, we've got with us and good questions. We're in a trusting relationship, and the intentions are good.

**Helga Svendsen 18:34**

I'm sure we've all been in meetings before where we get that whether it's a board meeting or otherwise, otherwise, but having those conversations and you can feel yourself being a bit triggered by them. And I think what I'm hearing is having that okay, what's going on in me here and what is the best outcome for the organization versus what's going on inside of me?

**Corrinne Armour 18:52**

When is this about winning like on a completely different track, we have a property which has tenants in it, and there's the neighbor has concerns about a tree. And so I think we've worked through that we don't want the tree pulled down because it's a beautiful tree. And it's a native tree and my husband's wanting to go back and say yes, but we have to tell him he has to. We don't save the tree. We're all good. We don't have to win winning with saving the tree with one Damn. Sometimes we just, we get caught in the energy of a dynamic. And we've really forgotten what's the purpose of the dynamic in the first place.

**Helga Svendsen 19:33**

In fact, you mentioned purpose before as well and not necessarily around the purpose of the organization. I mean, boards, hopefully well across setting the strategic direction for an organization and where do we want to be in the future? And what are our priorities to get there and all of those sorts of things in relation to purpose, but you were talking about purpose in relation to the team almost in the group? What have you seen in setting that team's purpose? How does that work? What are the sorts of purposes that groups set that you've seen have worked well, how do they have that conversation?

**Corrinne Armour 20:03**

Well, this is one of the earlier conversations that I have when I work with executive teams. Because often the purpose of an executive team in an unofficially defined is it's the meeting point where all the executives report to the CEO. And are we just a group of people running separate parts of the organization. And the common factor that we share is we all report to the CEO. And that's the way many executive teams run that loses the power and the promise of having everybody interconnected. This is not about decisions by committee, you know, no one can make decisions about what happens in the division that they lead because we come together and we all do it as a team. It's not about that. But what it is about is let's bring some of the challenges that we share together and let's understand what our purposes that we as a group are leading the whole organization and did a blog probably about two months ago where I put some flip chart images of different purposes that leadership teams I was working with, had come up with. And they're surprisingly varied. Like sometimes it's about providing the energy and the capacity for the organization to fulfill the mission. So it's more general. Other times they're quite specific. And it's

almost a point in time. So if I'm working with an executive team that hasn't worked well together, for whatever reason, and sometimes how I end up with an organization is because the board says we think the executive team needs some support more often it actually comes from within the executive team. So sometimes this purpose is really about us reforming as a powerful leadership team. It's a snapshot in time that in six months or 12 months will shift. This is the purpose of us as a team right now. In fact, in February, I'm working with two different boards, where I've been working with the executive teams up until now. And purpose is for at least one of them is one of the conversations we'll have,

**Helga Svendsen 22:21**

And is it generally the purpose in that context for how they work together? What's the horizon for one of a better word or the timespan of that purpose? How often do they all would you recommend they swing back on those conversations?

**Corrinne Armour 22:34**

Probably every 12 months, it's a good idea to revisit it, and sometimes it will be Yep. So I think the last time I revisited purpose with a leadership team was actually the week before last and they all looked at it and said, that has power and energy, that it was a three minute conversation. Other times that might be looking at that and I realized now there's nothing about the vision or there's nothing about enabling communities. And so they'll want to add something in and other and then at the furthest extreme, it's no, this doesn't feel right anymore. Let's just put that aside for the moment. And let's say if we were to start today, what would it look like?

**Helga Svendsen 23:12**

It's a really interesting angle that perhaps boards can add to their hopefully regular, hopefully annual board evaluation process, not just about then determining their own activity together as a team and the individuals that make up that team, but what is the purpose of them as a team,

**Corrinne Armour 23:30**

There's an incredible power with alignment. So when my personal purpose aligns with the team purpose of the board that I'm on, that clearly aligns with the organizational purpose, then that's strong.

**Helga Svendsen 23:48**

And often just having that conversation will bring that alignment, there may well be that similarity of using the room but until you really bring it together and attempt to document it, you won't know that

**Corrinne Armour 23:58**

And being clear on your personal purpose. This is important to thinking about a conversation I was having with an executive last week. And the board is quite a big business and the board has representation from their member group. Let me put it that way. And so the executive I was talking to was, was talking to me about how it's really important that when people join the board, they understand that they are coming as a director, with all of the responsibilities of a director. They're not coming as a parent, and they bring the knowledge of being a parent and being within the community. That's not if they're coming to advocate. And that's why they are willing to join the board. That's not the role that they're taking on here. And that's an interesting one of purpose. So what's my personal purpose in joining this board and what's the contribution I hope to make, and then how does that align to the purpose of the board and then the purpose of the organisation,

**Helga Svendsen 25:06**

Which again, is a good reminder that of course, we bring our own individual experience and our individual skills. But it's not about our individual agenda, much like the conversation before about the tree between you and your neighbour. It's not just about winning that career, so many beautiful pearls of wisdom in this conversation. So I'm wondering, drawing that together. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today? And

**Corrinne Armour 25:34**

ask more questions? I think you said in when you introduce me that my latest book is, it's called Leaders Who Ask. And so it's not surprising that I think that directors should ask questions, ask good questions of themselves and each other as well as of the executive team. So as more questions think about the extent to which you're bored to is fearless the extent to which you're having the conversations that matter and having them in ways that build each other, build the issue and build the executive team. And I think the third thing is, since we've talked so much about purpose is just be clear on what's your personal purpose? And then how clear Are we on the purpose of the board team?

**Helga Svendsen 26:24**

Fantastic advice for our board members or aspiring board members that might be listening. And it's highly likely people will be listening to this as the first episode of 2020. So it's a great recipe for a fearless year of 2020. ask more questions. Be more fearless, know your purpose. Fabulous. So is there a resource that you can recommend for the take on board community that might be useful for them?

**Corrinne Armour 26:51**

I think there's two. The first one is my book Leaders Who Ask that's available at any good online bookstore. And you can download the first free chapters complimentary on my website. So my website is [www.careerfh.com](http://www.careerfh.com). And with a double and a double in which tricks everybody, in fact, it tricked my grandfather when he registered my birth, which is why my name is spelt that way. It wasn't meant to me. I did not know that how fantastic and he didn't even know then my grandfather when he registered my birth so many years ago that it would become important when we needed a name as an email address.

**Helga Svendsen 27:32**

Well, at least it means that nobody else has got the domain.

**Corrinne Armour 27:35**

Yes, that's true.

**Helga Svendsen 27:36**

That's true. I'll make sure I'll put a link to your website and the book in the show notes. And,

**Corrinne Armour 27:42**

And then there's also a white paper that I think would be useful for the board community, which is fearless leadership. And both of those on the website, there's a free resources page or a complimentary resources page and you can download both of those. Connect with me on LinkedIn if you've enjoyed the conversation. Connect with me on LinkedIn.

**Helga Svendsen 28:02**

Well, we will put a link to your LinkedIn we will put a link to the white paper and to your website all in the show notes to make it easier for people to find you as well. Because I know as somebody who gets your weekly blog and watches you on LinkedIn again, there are all sorts of magnificent tips and tricks and tools for people to use their as well. So thank you. It has been wonderful to have you on the podcast. Thanks for being on the take on board podcast today.

**Corrinne Armour 28:27**

Have a brilliant 2020.