



Take on Board

Transcript – Leah Mether

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Leah Mether about why soft skills are the new hard. First let me tell you about Leah. Leah is on the board of Fertility Matters and has previously been on the boards of Highland football and netball club. And as she says all sorts of committees school council, Kindergarten president, playgroup president, women in Gippsland, AusKick. So she's got a bit of experience in this area. Leah is a communication and soft skills specialist obsessed with making the people part of leadership and work life easier. She's a speaker, trainer, facilitator, mentor and author of the book "Soft is the new hard how to communicate effectively under pressure". I should also say that this conversation has come about through an introduction by Corrinne Armour who you've already heard on the podcast, where we both happened to Corrinne at the same time, about the same thing. So Corrinne just connected us on the same call. As someone who loves to connect people. I love how that happened and how it brings us to this conversation today. So welcome to the Take On Board Podcast Leah.

Leah Mether 1:10

Thank you so much Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:12

So Leah before we dive into the conversation today about soft skills being the new hard. Let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me what was a young Leah like? And when did you get your first inkling that you'd end up doing what you're doing today?

Leah Mether 1:29

Or look, young Leah was a very, very driven young girl, the eldest of four daughters, the typical type A personality bit of a perfectionist, I now call myself a recovering perfectionist. It's something I've worked very hard to overcome over the years. So I was a great student played sport, very driven and very community minded. I live in a gorgeous little town in regional Victoria called Willow Grove, beside a lake with the mountains coming out behind it, only about 350 people in the town that I live in. And there were three generations of my family living in the town for a long time, actually, four at one point. And my grandparents, my grandpa in particular was heavily involved in the local community on lots of committees, my dad, the same as well as my mum. And so it was a natural

progression for me at a young age was involved in lots of those community groups through my parents. And then in my early 20s, started getting involved myself.

Helga Svendsen 2:37

Wow. So it is something we often hear from people that their involvement comes from that family involvement around community. You say in your 20s, that was where you first got involved. What was that?

Leah Methner 2:47

Yeah, it was with the Hill End football netball Club, which back then was separate. It was a football club and a netball club. And yeah, I played there and got involved on the netball committee, and was then on the board of the combined club and actually part of leading the amalgamation of the club. And that was sort of in my early to mid 20s. So, you know, there were lots of learnings really early on about, you know, having difficult conversations bringing people on board, because there was some of the older guys in the football club that were quite resistant to combining the two. And here I was trying to show them that this was actually a really beneficial thing for the entire community in clubs. So I think that foundation early on was it was great experience for what I went on to do.

Helga Svendsen 3:46

Well what a beautiful segue to our conversation about communication skills and why they are absolutely key in the boardroom. Now, you've literally written the book about this. So soft skills are the new hard. What are soft skills? And why are they important for the boardroom?

Leah Methner 4:08

Yeah, it's such a great question. And look, as I say in the book, soft skills don't confuse them with easy and the reason it's called soft is the new hard is because soft skills are not soft at all. They are the hardest part, the hardest bit of our work life, whether it's on a board or our personal relations, relationships, it's the people bit that's the hard bit. And when I say soft skills, essentially what they are, is the non job specific interpersonal skills that are absolutely crucial to our success no matter what we do, if it's a job or role that involves working with other people. They're transferable skills, and they absolutely play that major role in our success. They're not that hard skills traditionally are those texts. Not skills like you might study to be a lawyer or an accountant and you need to learn those jobs specific skills. Soft skills are things like communication, leadership, self management, emotional intelligence, adaptability, that whole swag of really key skills. And for a long time, though, they've been pushed to the side and seen a second rate. And, you know, we've all been told, even there's a bit of it still now in schools where you're told the STEM subjects, the science, technology, engineering, and maths, that's the most important stuff. And for a lot of people at different ages,

from school age, right through, you know, work with people right into their 70s, or non boards and, and in organisations. And oftentimes, the soft skills have, we've never been taught them. And we haven't been taught them for two main reasons. The first one is because for a really long time, they skills we consider innate you're either born a good communicator, or you're not, it's your personality, it is what it is, it's fixed, you can't do anything about it. This is just who I am. And that's just rubbish. Yes, of course, we're born with different personalities and different strengths. Of course, however, like any skills, soft skills can be learned and developed, I always give two caveats to that, though, if you're willing to learn. And if you're willing to do the work, you can't improve these skills if you sit there going, but you can't teach me. But the second reason that we haven't a lot of us learnt the skills is because traditionally, soft skills were dismissed as the fluffy extra nice to have, but certainly not as important as my hard technical skills. And boy, boy is the world waking up to that. There's a lot of studies coming out at the moment, from the likes of Deloitte, Access Economics, Comm Bank, saying that we've dropped the ball on these soft skills. And in fact, soft skills are the skills of the future, because they're hard to outsource. And they're hard to automate. So as technology and robots and things comes in and takes over a lot of jobs, it's our ability to connect as humans, that is our superpower, literally, as humans. So, you know, I think a lot of organisations are now realizing that these are the skills we need a lot of technical skills can be taught easier than soft skills. So we want to hire or appoint people to boards, who can have difficult conversations who can discuss robust ideas in a respectful way. Yes, you've got to have your experience in whatever back, you know, whether it's governance or finance, but I think we're realizing how crucial these skills are.

Helga Svendsen 7:51

So look, I'm thinking back to the football netball club, because he had mentioned around the merger there. And, you know, as you say, there are some technical skills that are required there, you would have needed to know about the legal requirements to merge and bringing the finances together and all of those technical skills yet, again, as you'd mentioned, I'm pretty sure that success or otherwise, of that merger, would be down to bring the people with you. So can you tell us a bit more about that, and what your role, was, you know, your experience in that and how that showcased the soft skills, inverted commas, and and how that brought about the I'm assuming success of that merger.

Leah Mether 8:35

Yeah, it was successful. And it did take a bit of time. And, you know, for a very headstrong young woman in her early 20s, who considers herself a feminist, what I had to be really conscious of, is not being a bulldozer, and not just standing on my high horse and going, but this is the right thing to do. We've got just as equal voices the mentor here, the reason that that wasn't the best approach is because exactly as he said, I needed to bring people along with me. And just going like a bullet, which I can absolutely be guilty of sometimes was not going to be the right approach in that situation. So I had to step back. And I had to say, Well, what are the key messages here? What outcome do I want? And how do I tailor my communication to give myself the best chance of achieving that outcome? And interestingly, that's one of the key points that I then wrote about 15, almost 15 years on when I wrote the book, because I had to say, what's in it for them? How can I

show them that this actually is beneficial for them as well. It's not just netball, wanting to come in and and take the footballs money or anything like that. It's actually hey, we've got this. You know, as I said, it's a small town volunteers are hard to come by. We've got this pool of volunteers that are willing to get in and have a crack at netball, who can be helping you out to bring in more money. This is actually a huge benefit to football and netball. We were already operating. We were in the same competition, you know, we're playing together every week, we traveled together, we are essentially one club, but we would just separated. So it made sense. But I had to make sure that, particularly when I sat down and had some of those conversations with some people who had genuine concerns that I listened to those concerns, and, you know, I heard what they were saying, so that then I could adapt my messaging to counter those objections. So you know, sometimes it was a matter of putting that in before they even had to ask the question that I could say, Now I know, one of the concerns might be this, which is why we're going to do this other thing. And you know, that being smart about it, and stepping back and considering my approach first was really important.

Helga Svendsen 11:07

So how do you remind yourself of that, because, you know, as you say, we're often you know, let's get things done. Let's just get on with it. Let's just move on through. And I'm imagining all I know, because it's in my me as well, often, it's like, oh, I just want to take this off, I just want to get it done. And you really have to consciously slow yourself down so that you can listen and do those things. How do you consciously slow yourself down so that you don't end up smashing through the gate?

Leah Methner 11:37

Yeah, it's such a great question. And it is one I've really had to work on. And, you know, we might get into it a bit later. But I the whole model on which the book is framed on the five C's of effective communication is based around this idea. And the reason I developed it was because I think the main reason a lot of people mock up their communication is because they have an idea of what they want to say. And then they just open their mouth and start saying it. And we usually get halfway through. And then in our head, we're saying, oh, my goodness, this isn't even what I wanted to say, or how I want it, and I can see their face. And this isn't going well. And then we walk away going, Oh crap, that was a bit of a train wreck. So I developed this whole model to help with this slowing down. And you know, really quickly, the first say is choice. That's about taking personal responsibility for how we communicate and behave with no room for Yeah But. We like to Yeah But. Yeah, but they spoke to me like that Yeah But, but this is the situation and you know, at its absolute foundation, communication starts with us and taking that personal responsibility. The next step is control. And I'll come back to that in a sec. Because that is where the tips, see it around. How do we manage our emotions regulate ourselves in the moment, third, C is consideration. So this is where we do start saying, you know, those two questions I gave you before around? What outcome do I want? And how do I tailor my communication to give me the best chance of achieving that outcome? Because it's not a one size fits all approach, you know, you might have someone on your board, who is a bit of an aggressive communicator, they're quite abrupt, a bit blunt, you know, if you talk around in circles to someone like that, that is like a red rag to a bull, they want short, sharp messages. So

consideration is where you think, what do I want to get across here? And who am I dealing with? same token, if you've got someone on the board, who is a processor who likes to stop and think, and you just fire bullets at them with short, sharp messages, they're not going to give you an answer. They're, they're going to probably dig their heels in because they want more processing time. So considerations where we think about that approach. Fourth, C is courage. love talking about that one, because I have a lot of people say to me, when I'm talking communication, this is great layer, but I don't have the confidence to have these difficult conversations. And I always reply by saying that's okay. Because it's not about confidence, it's about courage, I actually think were sold a bit of a bum deal and with the focus on confidence, and a lot of people think are but I don't have the confidence to have the conversation. So I won't have it. And actually, it's about being brave and vulnerable, and all of those sort of things, owning our mistakes. And then the last thing is communication. This is where the tips and tricks come in. And if you do the first four, it's a sequential model. That last bit the communication takes care of itself. But I think you know, we're so quick to just want to go what's a tip and trick to help me have this conversation but there's all this pre work that we need to do first, in terms of how I slow myself down and manage myself. There's a couple of key things I like to do. The first one is put a pause between my reaction and my response. And that's easier said than done. So there's a couple of ways I do that. I like to try to remind myself to take a big deep breath. And some people think, breathing, it's so simplistic. Gosh, it's powerful. It really is. And to remind myself to take a deep breath, I actually and I know this is a visual audio means so people can't see me right now. But if you look at your hand in between your thumb and your forefinger, if you grab that webbing in there, there's actually a pressure point in there. And it's a great little way to physically ground yourself in the moment. So what I like to do is, if I'm can feel myself getting a bit worked up in a conversation, I will grab that pressure point. And it's just that reminder, take a deep breath Leah. And the reason I do that is because we can say all you got to remember to breathe. And you won't remember that in the moment. So having that physical trigger can be useful. And what I'll sometimes do is then put a pause in by physically saying something, I might say, you know, what, you've caught me a bit off guard. And I really want to give that some consideration and thought, can you leave that with me? for half an hour, 10 minutes, and I'll come back to you. Now, if you say that you could do it, just avoid it. And if you're in a board meeting, maybe you can't leave and take time. But you can still say, great question. Let me think about that for a sec, because I want to give you a considered response and then pause. Take a breath. And probably the third tip that I really, really use a lot. And that's the curious mindset. Yeah, the benefit of curiosity, where instead of me jumping straight in with no, that's a stupid idea. Why would you suggest that?

I ask a question. And I might say, Helga, that's really different to how I see things. Can you help me understand where you're coming from there? Can you tell me more about that. And that does two things. One, it allows me to get more information from you. So then I get the full picture. But 2. While you're explaining that, I can take that moment to take some deep breaths, and calm myself down.

Helga Svendsen 17:26

Oh, gosh, see, again, so much so much in there. And it was interesting, when you were talking about that physical one, you probably saw me But again, it's an audio thing. I did exactly that. And it's easily done. When you're in the boardroom. Actually, to take that moment, it's very easy to do that nobody would necessarily notice. Or if they did, that might not be a bad thing, either. It's like Oh, Helga is just taking a moment to think, gee, you know, if people notice that I'm taking time to reflect that's a good thing, because it is a key thing for board members to do.

Leah Mether 17:56

Yeah, it's it's funny, I often have people respond to me, when I say take a breath, and I'll go put, I'll look like an idiot. If I stop and say, give me a moment or take a breath. They're gonna think You're such an idiot. And I always reply and say, you're gonna look like far less of an idiot than if you respond with that uncensored emotional reaction and you yell at someone or you say something that you regret, far better to have a pause and take a breath.

Helga Svendsen 18:25

And I think it's interesting because it often commands respect, I think, you know, if you make a movement or make a noise, so that the attention comes to you in the boardroom, or wherever it may be. And then you pause, it often makes people listen even more. It shows people that you're gathering your thoughts, I think it's a real mark of respect, not a mark of frivolousness, or frivolity, that's the word frivolity or otherwise, it's actually taking it seriously and considering and that is what we need to do in the boardroom.

Leah Mether 18:59

Yeah, well, you know, we're appointed to a board to make decisions and to think so we don't have to have the answer right there on the spot. And if you are worried about, you know, the pause, and you know, are people gonna think that I'm laboring the point or something, you can put some words around it, like I said, and you know, you might say, well, look off the top of my head, my initial reaction is this, but I really want to consider that a bit more or mm hmm, great question. Let me think on that for a moment, because I want to give you a considered response. And it just, you know, the fact that you're showing that you're actually doing the thinking is really important.

Helga Svendsen 19:41

Okay, so you were talking about the five C's before choice, control, consideration, courage and communication. And you say did come back to control?

Leah Methner 19:52

Oh, yes. So control. That was some of those tips there about how you stay in control because it's not about you. controlling everything. But that second say control is really about emotional intelligence. It's are you able to control yourself under pressure those first two C's in that model, choice and control are all about you, they are inward focused. And if you want to improve your communication, it starts with you. And it's funny because sometimes I have senior executives or leaders or board members come to me and they say, We need you to help us fix these other people, the problems with them, we like how do we deal with these people? And I'll always say, Yep, I can have a chat to you about that. But let's start with you. And sometimes I have people say, No, no, this isn't about me, this is about their, their their problem. And look, there might be things that they're doing, but you always have to start with you. It's an inside out approach to improve your communication. And the control pace really is about that self awareness, understanding what you do particularly under pressure, and then being able to regulate yourself. And it's not about emotion suppression at all. But it is about can I express my emotions in an effective and appropriate way? It's also that control one is also about the importance of controlling our controllables and letting the rest go.

Helga Svendsen 21:31

I'm nodding knowingly, but talk us through that, what does that mean?

Leah Methner 21:34

We waste so much time worrying about things that are totally out of our control. And this is something you know, in this time of a year of craziness with COVID. This is a conversation I'm having with lots of organisations at the moment, not only in regard to communication and leadership, also in relation to self management and stress management, and resilience at this time. And a lot of your listeners, I have no doubt will be familiar with Stephen Covey's circles of influence model where, you know, it looks a bit like a bull's eye and in the circle, you've got control, then you've got the circle of influence, then you've got the circle of concern. And, and that's really what I use, as well in this model, because it's bringing people back to say, Well, what can you control here? And the answer to that is ourselves, the only thing we can control other things related to us, whether it's managing our emotions, our attitude, our mindset, how we show up, how we communicate, we can control that we can influence other people, through the relationships we have in the way we communicate, but we can't control them. And then that outer circle, that circle of concern, that's where we have to let things go. Because we can't control them, we can't influence them. And worrying about them doesn't change the situation at all, just makes us feel like rubbish. So, you know, that's a really, it's a simple model. But that's one that I use every day, whatever challenge life throws at me, I'll go, where does it fit here? What can I control? What can I influence and what is now out there? So as a board, it might be that perhaps the government's bringing in some new regulation. And you're a bit stressed about it not being asked, what's this going to mean? What can we control, we can control our response. So we can take that big, deep breath, not have the big rant and rave, perhaps not shoot out that angry email that we haven't thought about beforehand? In terms of influence, you

might have some influence, you might as a board be able to say, well, these are our concerns with this new regulation. And we're going to make a submission to government about what our concerns are. But then you understand that once you've done that, once you've done all the influence you can, it's out of your hands now and government can make whatever decision they want. Yes, and whether you worry about it or not, won't change the decision. So it doesn't mean you don't care about it, or it doesn't impact you. But it's about, can I say this in teams all the time as well, where they hold on to things and now bitch and whinge about those same things and go round and round in circles and get down into that real toxic mindset. And then when you talk to them about it, you realize that they can't control it, they can't influence it. So that we've just got to let it go.

Helga Svendsen 24:31

Let it go. Let it go. Absolutely. And indeed, you know, and I'm sure you found this as well. Those that have a better have a strong understanding of what you can control versus what you can influence versus what you let go actually often have more influence.

Leah Methner 24:47

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Because they're focused on where they can have an impact. So the effort they put in pays off rather than wasting that time. getting bogged down in areas that you can't control or influence.

Helga Svendsen 25:04

Oh, Leah, I knew the time we'd go too quickly. We have covered an enormous amount. And there's so many fabulous tips in there for people. What are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Leah Methner 25:18

Oh, look, I think, for me, it would be the start with you. Okay, it has to be, I can share a whole heap of tips and tricks. But you won't be able to put any of them into practice, unless you start with you. Because you will know how to communicate, theoretically, you'll, you know, I'm sure people who listen to these podcasts, they're, you know, they're on boards, they're in exact positions, you know how to communicate doesn't mean you're doing it knowing and doing a two very different things. And I put my hand up for that, too. I get it wrong all the time, too, because I'm human, written a book on it. I stuffed it up all the time. But we have to be able to start with us and say, you know, what, do I take personal responsibility for how I communicate and behave? Do I learn my mistakes when I make them and admit that quickly? I think though, the key point in terms of when you're in the boardroom, is to come with that mindset of curiosity. Yeah, it's okay, that not everyone thinks like you, no one, no one does think like you. Common sense is not common. So you have an opinion

on what's right. And so to the other people, and it doesn't necessarily make either of you right and wrong. It just makes it different. And I think if we approach with a curious mindset, it allows us to focus on the outcome we want. And on getting it right, rather than on being right. And I think, as board members we are there to make the best decisions for whatever organisation we're governing. And I think that we have to keep coming back to that, that this isn't about individuals and personalities. And to get the best decisions, we actually have to be able to discuss and debate ideas. And that's a good thing. We need to do it respectfully. But that's a good thing, a board that just smiles and nods and agrees on everything. That's actually not what you want, because it's not going to make the best decisions.

Helga Svendsen 27:30

Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Leah Methner 27:35

Oh, look, there's there's a lot in terms of what people can find from me. There's certainly the book, I was absolutely thrilled. It was recently a finalist in the Australia Career Book of the Year awards, which was my selection, pretty awesome. But there's a whole lot of free resources on my website, which is just leahmethner.com.au. There's, you know, communication style quiz there lots of free resources there in terms of resources from other people. One that I just think it's a masterclass in leadership is and I'm sure it's been said before, but it is Brene Brown's Dare to Lead. Like, it's just a lot of what I talked about in my book, she speaks about to you know, the importance of empathy and clarity. And that clear is kind that we don't shy away and that we use our vulnerability. And I think, you know, for anyone out there who's not a big reader, you know, I know a lot of listeners have probably made their way through most of Netflix this year. However, if you haven't stumbled across it yet, to under the documentaries on netflix, Brene Brown has a one of her keynotes on there, and it's called the Call to Courage. And it is magnificent. I can't recommend it highly enough. So it's only about 80 - 90 minutes. Great way to spend an evening.

Helga Svendsen 28:59

Well, I haven't got there on Netflix yet. So I've literally just put that on my list. And I'll make sure that we have a link to your book and to your website and Brene Brown's in the show notes so people can find them easily. Oh, Leah, thank you. It has been so fabulous to have you on the pod today and to have this conversation. Thank you, Corrinne for making that introduction a few months ago. Thank you. It's been just fabulous. And and I'm sure they're gonna get an enormous amount from the wisdom you've shared with us today. So thanks for being here.

Leah Mether 29:31

Thank you for having me.