

Supporting Inclusive Boards – what next?

Podcast transcript

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Key

+ **Kim Ansell:** KA (host)

+ **Tesse Akpeki:** TA

Transcript

KA: Hello, I'm Kim Ansell, and I work on all things government, leadership and management at Advance HE. I'm here today to talk to Tesse Akpeki about our successful Supporting Inclusive Boards programme and the community that we run alongside it. After running two programmes, we're keen to understand what we've learned, what has changed, and to prioritise what more there is to do. Tesse and I ran the Supporting Inclusive Boards programme for the last two years, and I learned so much from working with Tesse and colleagues across the sector. Tesse works as a governor, as a coach and mentor for governors, as an inspiration for governance professionals in many sectors, including higher education. Tesse is also a recent award winner, crowned Governance Champion of the Year at the CGI Awards last month. Huge congratulations, Tesse, and welcome to this podcast.

TA: Thank you very much, Kim. I mean, you know my excitement of being crowned champion for governance of the year by the CGI for the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, so I want to thank you for supporting me in this effort, 'cos without you, it wouldn't have come to fruition. I'm really looking forward, Kim, to this conversation.

KA: Thank you, Tesse, and I've really enjoyed working with you on the programme. And our work with governance professionals and governors has been engaging and rewarding. We've had some great feedback about those two programmes, which has equipped participants with practical skills to make a difference in the short, medium and long term. We also heard how it's built confidence to try new things, to think differently, and to recognise the importance of the role of the governance professional in implementing change to improve board diversity. What have been your highlights, Tesse?

TA: Wow Kim [laughter], that's a challenge, there's so many, but let me focus on a few now. I think for me, what comes immediately to mind is the focus on the needs or the intentions of the institution, led by the board, and recognising that this needs to be supported by governance professionals who are well resourced and well supported. This means that it's important to continually equip governance professionals.

KA: Yep, absolutely. And we've taken the opportunity to invite governors to some of the programme, so that we are encouraging governance professionals and their governors to

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explore the challenges together, to hear the same messages, and to collaborate on solutions and next steps. What do you think was the main takeaway for the collaborative learning?

TA: Wow, again, another brilliant insight and question there. Collaboration and partnership is the name of the game these days, and governance is no exception. So for me, I loved, Kim, your particular focus on the golden thread, and the specific golden thread that comes to my mind is the thread that runs through from recruitment to a sense of belonging and wellbeing. The second piece there in the thread is understanding connectedness, interconnectedness, and two words come to mind, Kim. I really love the Swahili words. One is ubuntu, which means, “You are, I am,” so it’s about the universal connectivity, that we’re all one really, and we need to kind of mine that oneness. But the second Swahili word is sawubona, which means, “I see you.” So, there’s something in this interconnectedness, which is that we see each other, and in seeing each other, we hear, we understand, we grow and develop together. So, I’m going to ask you a question, Kim. Two years on, how do you think universities should be challenging their practices around board diversity and inclusivity?

KA: Yes Tesse, a really good question, and for me, a governing body that is diverse and inclusive, which comprises different opinions, experiences and insights can better support strategic decision making, which addresses the needs, interests and expectations of all stakeholders. So, have they got their composition right to be able to do that? And the challenge is not just ticking the box in terms of diversity, but implementing inclusive practices, which means that everyone is heard and contributes to ensure the best outcomes and decisions for the institution. And we know, Tesse, that there’s a lot of evidence from ongoing surveys and benchmarks about the benefits of inclusive environments, from students right to boards.

So Tesse, we’re planning our interactive workshop for governance professionals and governors. What do you think we need to focus on in that workshop?

TA: Well Kim, there are lots of options, but, you know, I think that it’s important that we focus on the following. Firstly, how governance professionals and governors need to work together and support each other. Secondly, that we focus on an understanding of others, embracing differences, recognising commonalities and similarities. You know, we did hear from someone in the last cohort about the value, the benefit of neurodiversity, and how that could make difference even better, and we have to look at ways that difference can be accommodated. And I think we need in this space to look at the range of diversity and how it adds value, and what difference a difference makes. And finally, I think it’s important that we look at some practical lessons that we picked up from both programmes that we ran.

KA: I agree, absolutely. And the last thing we’ll need to do, Tesse, is to think about what more there is to do. So, what’s important for the future?

TA: Hey, you're on fire, Kim. I love the way you're asking these questions, wow. Looking to the future, shaping the future, in the two cohorts, we actually looked at diversity and inclusion, the D and the I. We looked at equal opportunities and accessibility, and we also looked at equity. And I think we need to be looking at the DIEEE, we need to be doing that. But there's something that is creeping into the discourse these days and that is the J word. What does that mean, you may ask? The J word stands for justice. So, where do we have social justice or criminal justice, or educational justice? And it's not to overegg. It's just to have that J being the cement between the D and the I and the E and the E. So, I think that pathway would serve us better, to have greater value added, greater impact and greater connection.

KA: That sounds as if it's going to be really great, and I'm looking forward to our interactive webinar on Thursday 18th January. I encourage anyone listening to book their place as soon as possible, as numbers will be limited. Thank you, Tesse, and I look forward to seeing you in the New Year.

TA: Nothing going to hold me back. I'm telling you, the problem will be how to keep me really going till the 18th, 'cos I'm too excited for my own good, Kim [laughter].

KA: Bye Tesse.

TA: Bye Kim [laughter].



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