



YS UP GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS PODCAST

Episode 8 – Empowering Young Entrepreneurs and Anti Cyber Bullying with Taj Pabari – Fiftysix Creations

Transcript

Intro:

Welcome to YS Up Governance and Boards podcast brought to you by 3YS Owl Governance Consultants. Covering hot topics in governance, risk, latest regulatory changes and issues keeping directors and executives awake at night. Here are your hosts Ainslie Cunningham and Deb Anderson.

Deb:

Welcome to today's YS Up Governance and Boards Podcast. Today we are joined by Taj Pabari. Taj is one of Australia's youngest and most successful social entrepreneurs. At the age of 11 Taj started his first business, a tech blog for kids by kids. In 2014, the website was acquired by an international manufacturing firm for a small fee. At the age of 14, Taj founded Fiftysix Creations using the funds he raised from the tech blog alongside investment from Sydney impact investor, Steve Macdonald. The social enterprise delivers entrepreneurship and financial literacy programs for young people. As of 1 April 2020, Fiftysix Creations has educated more than 60,000 students from across Australia and New Zealand. Taj's work and story has been featured on Sunrise, 60 minutes, The Today Show, National Geographic, ABC, Nickelodeon, and CNBC, and now YS Up Governance and Boards. Accolades collected by Taj and Fiftysix Creations include being named the 2017 Young Australian of the year for Queensland, the Australian Young Innovator of the year for 2014, and winner of Westpac's top 20 businesses of tomorrow. Welcome Taj.

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Taj:

Thanks for having me guys.

Ainslie:

Thank you for joining us. So, tell us a little bit about Fiftysix Creations.

Taj:

Yeah, absolutely. So Fiftysix started when I was 14 years old. I was a very disengaged young person in school. I didn't enjoy being there and didn't see the point in why I was sitting there. And for me, I just wanted a life outside of the classroom. I wanted to kind of just explore the world around me. I was fascinated by technology. I was fascinated by kind of just the digital economy in general and thought, alright, well, like this is kind of the thing I want to do when I grow up, I might as well just start now, and

started Fiftysix Creations when I was 14 and we've kind of transitioned to an education, social enterprise, delivering business and entrepreneurship programs to solve youth unemployment. So actually getting young people in regional communities to start their very own business or social enterprise to solve a community problem, and at the end of it, they're actually learning some really amazing skills, things like communication, collaboration, creativity, skills that we think are really quite important for success in the digital economy, especially for some of these regional kids as well. So yeah, I've got the best job in the world.

Ainslie:

It sounds like it absolutely. So tell us a little bit about the work that you do with the indigenous youth community.

Taj:

Yeah, yeah, no, definitely. So kind of from the start at Fiftysix Creations, we were kind of like, all right, well, like the skills that we're teaching it pretty much for everyone there for every young person, regardless of age, gender, or postcode. Equally some of these skills can be incredibly valuable for say some of those more disadvantaged students where they might be in the poverty trap. They might not necessarily have access to a really world class education. And the idea was, well, let's name the organisation, Fiftysix Creations, and in numerology, the numbers five and six means opportunity. And we thought we're going to give every single young person, regardless if they can afford it or not the opportunity to have an entrepreneurial education. And that kind of started well, like we could work with kids in India or in Africa, etc, but closer to home, we've got some incredibly incredible young people who are in some really disadvantaged situations, close to home in Queensland up in Cape York.

Taj:

You've got kids who are incredibly bright, but quite simply have not had the opportunity to kind of just explore the world of entrepreneurship. We decided from a pretty early stage within the organisation that we wanted to have a strong social purpose and the idea of youth unemployment for regional communities and getting them out of the poverty trap was actually something quite practical and something quite realistic and getting young people who were still in school, primary school, even starting their own business to contribute back to their economy was actually quite feasible. And yeah, over the last six years, we've now had the opportunity to work with over 60,000 young people, most of them in Australia, and we've also had some presence in New Zealand and Singapore as well.

Deb:

I was watching your TEDx talk last night, and the experience that you had going on an Anthony Robbins course. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Taj:

Yeah, definitely. Well, like, gosh, like I did that TEDx talk, I think that was a UQ one where I spoke about Tony Robbins and like, I think I was 16 at the time and they were like, do you want to do this TEDx talk? And I was just like, like I used to watch a lot of TEDx talks. To be honest, I still do and thought, all right, let me just quickly do this one. And it was like, it was a very quick five to 10-minute talk and every time I watch it, I can't seem to delete this talk anymore, but like it's out there forever. Right, so it was a good learning opportunity for me, but no, certainly I've been a massive follower of Tony Robbins since I was 14. My parents took me to one of his seminars, when I was quite young.

Taj:

I've always been quite interested in business because I started my first tech blog when I was 11, as you said at the start, it was a really cool experience because like that was in my peak hatred of school.

I was on three suspensions at that time. I was on like, I was about to be expelled from school during that period, and this, the whole idea of electronic blog, to be kind of doing something outside of the classroom was the one thing that engaged me back into traditional education. Mum and Dad were just like, Hey, well, we want to take you to a Tony Robbins seminar and thought, alright, well, like three days off school for me, it was just incredible because I hated being there. Like I honestly hated it. So, 3 days being able to go to Sydney, at a hotel and kind of not be in the classroom was like anything.

Taj:

So I said, yes, and had the most amazing 3 days, set some really amazing goals, did a visualisation board, kind of just set my goals for what I wanted to achieve in life and that was not something I ever did in school, it was not something we ever had the opportunity to do in school. It was never something we were taught about in school. And I think just the whole principle idea of setting aspirations for one's life was something that really hooked me into his teachings, and I had been a massive follower of his and had the opportunity to meet him in New York a couple of years ago, which was a really chance encounter in a film studio and got the opportunity to say thank you. So, a massive, massive fan of him.

Deb:

And how was the fire walking?

Taj:

Loved it, like, like I was literally 14. I was the only 14-year-old in that seminar. Mum and Dad were massive, like there've been massive advocates of his work and kind of were like, hey, this UPW seminars in Sydney where it's around your birthday, they kind of spun it as a birthday gift as well and like he kind of puts you in a state that you don't feel it, you walk across burning hot coal without feeling a thing, and to me, that sort of, kind of the theory behind that really fascinated me, and still to this day fascinates me and something that I'm, I look, I, I think I was very lucky to be able to kind of engage in a seminar like that from, from the age of 14. It's certainly when I have kids, whoever, whether it's his kids, whether it's his associates, I will certainly be sending them to one of his seminars because it certainly changed my life.

Ainslie:

So, in relation to the micro MBAs, Taj, do you find there's, they've become quite popular with the kids and how, do they sort of interact with those and, what do you sort of see the benefits of, for children off the back of that?

Taj:

Yeah, definitely. Well kind of ourselves as a kind of a holistic education provider. We teach entrepreneurship, but the skills they're learning from entrepreneurial skills are massive, right? Entrepreneurial skills, people, skills, they're things like communication. You don't just have to by practicing communication that doesn't just set you up for a career pathway down business and entrepreneurship. That's a career through every single background. If you, whatever you want to do, when you grow up, you're going to have to learn about communication. You're going to need to learn how to negotiate with other people. You're going to need to understand fundamental collaboration and teamwork skills. And we kind of thought, well, like kids in itself, if you go to a child and say, hey, we're going to be doing public speaking camp, the answer is more times than not there's no, I don't want to learn about public speaking.

Taj:

I don't want to go to public speaking camp. I, for one was one of those kids. I didn't want to go to public speaking camp because that's just weird and I didn't want to do it. yeah, like it's not cool, right?

Like who wants to learn about public speaking during school holiday? Like certainly not me and certainly not most of the kids that we've worked with, but the idea of who wants to start a business who wants to change the world, uh, like they don't even know how to start a business or change the world, but the idea of like, great, like, I don't really know how, but like sounds good. I'll give it a go, and when they're actually starting a business, you can't really start a business without communicating your ideas to another person. Therefore, they're practicing communication skills.

Taj:

You can't start a business without the support of other people, team members, co-founders that sort of thing. And therefore, they need to find a team, grow a team, incentivise other people to come work for them, and we kind of realised, well, like entrepreneurship is a great way of teaching transferable life skills, and instead of trying to get kids to persuade them, to learn about public speaking, just get them to start a business because ultimately if they want to succeed down a pathway in business, they're going to need to know how to communicate. They're going to find a way to push out of their comfort zones. And there's obviously some very negative elements of peer pressure. But when you put a group of 30 people who will want to start a business together, most of them are going to learn about communication skills. Most of them are going to find a way to work in a group setting. Most of them are going to find a way to be creative. And I think that's kind of the positive side to peer pressure because they kind of push each other to learn some really amazing skills

Deb:

What have been, what are some, some of those successful businesses that have been built Taj?

Taj:

Yeah, absolutely. So last year we had the opportunity to deliver a program for the State government called the Ministers Climate Challenge, where it was a challenge of, to all Queensland students, grade 3 to grade 12, I think, kids had to identify a climate problem within the Queensland ecosystem and brainstorm a solution. We visited thousands of young people all across the State from Cape York to the Gold Coast. It was pretty much, it was incredible, where we got the opportunity to literally hear kids, what are some of your problems and hey, well, this is a platform for you to, to pitch them, and winners of that challenge actually got to pitch their ideas to the former US Vice President, Al Gore, as well as the Minister for Environment, Leeanne Enoch here in Brisbane. So, we brought together like 15 kids from all across Queensland, some of the brightest minds to pitch their climate solutions to a former US Vice President, who's obviously made a very clear statement, he wants invest into young people coming up with climate solutions, and we had these really amazing kids. We had George and Carter the cofounders of EPAC. They're based in, Cooran in Queensland. They go to school at Cooran State School and they had this idea for a sustainable tourism pack, which included like the reusable cutlery, a reusable straw, the metal straws, plates that kind of, biodegradable, bamboo bowls, that sort of thing, it was just like, it was incredible. It was a very sustainable, tourism pack and it costs \$40. These guys were like nine years old and they pitched their idea to Al Gore. Anyway, one of the other judges was the director of the 2040 movie, Damon Gameau the kids ended up getting \$10,000 of pre-orders that night.

Taj:

They ended up getting a commercial filmed by Damon Gameau they're about to raise another \$25,000. They're just incredible bunch of kids that their idea was we want to create sustainable tourism and not only have they actually created their product, they've got \$10,000 of pre-orders and a television ad that's been completely clipped and created by someone who's actually directed quite an incredible film. And we thought for a bunch of nine year olds living in a regional community, this is, this is pretty incredible, and we've kind of got young people just like George and Carter from not just Queensland, but across the country who were just coming up with problems and identifying

solutions. And along the way, generating pre-orders meeting cool people who are creating ads for them. Uh, and it's incredible because they're learning some really amazing skills and building their network, and ultimately creating a better world for us all.

Taj:

So it's, it's exciting stuff

Ainslie:

What a fantastic experience for these kids. What are your thoughts on code, that's being taught in the schools?

Taj:

I hate it. I absolutely hate it. It's something that I, it is a media statement that a couple of politicians put out a few years ago. You had people like Bill Gates from Microsoft. You had a lot of the tech CEO's saying, well, coding is the new global language. The only reason they want it as a global language is if, if we have a lots of coders, the cost of hiring coders will inevitably go down. To me, it's a basic economic argument. You train every single young person how to code the price of hiring computer programmers is going to go down. It's a fact, it's not a conspiracy. It's not a, it's a basic fact.

Taj:

And when you train every single Queensland student in particular, how to code these people are going to be the next blue-collar workers of the future. And I think it's incredibly disappointing that Queensland an innovative State that we've tried to mould ourselves into is saying that coding is a new global language, because right now we do have enough coders. Sure, they're paid at a high rate right now, but in 10 years' time, when we've got every single kid in India, every single kid in China, learning how to code a Queensland coder is going to be effectively useless. And if they are still around, they're going to be paid very little. So that's my views on coding. Other people have very differing opinions on coding. But my opinion is purely based on research so we can differ on opinions, but research doesn't lie.

Ainslie:

Mine's based on having to help with homework, so I'm all for it not being taught, but anyway, it's all good.

Taj:

Yup. Yup. Look, look, the good company, the good computer programmers and probably the more exceptional computer programmers will find success. I just feel that training every single kid to code is a waste of time, because if you're the best in any industry, whether it's an automated already automated industry, the elite ones will always be successful and that's completely okay. But to train a generation of computer programmers probably isn't the right thing.

Deb:

So Taj, you wrote an article called a war on smartphones at schools, which ultimately I believe led to you being invited to join a task force on cyber bullying. What are your thoughts on cyber bullying and how do we eradicate it, we can't eliminate it, but how do we reduce it?

Taj:

Yeah, absolutely well the Premier put out in her feelers after Amy Dolly Everett committed suicide in a boarding school in Queensland, a Queensland student, and her story obviously struck a chord across the State. It certainly struck a chord with our premier, and full credit to her. She acted decisively straightaway and said, all right, well like, like cyber bullying is not, obviously not just a Queensland problem. It's certainly not an Australian problem, but we want to be part of the major solution here in Queensland. Then she kind of put together a task force, the anti cyber bullying task force and said, Hey, well, what, what can we do to combat cyber bullying? And how do we make sure that we don't have stories like Amy Dolly Everett coming up into the future and kind of some of the, the media statements, once again, politicians, have very frequently called for a ban on smartphones, that if you want to stop cyber bullying, then ban the smartphone and on paper, that sounds really attractive.

Taj:

Like if you don't have smart phones in the classroom, well cyber bullying won't happen, but the core issue behind stopping bullying is bullying in the classroom. Then normal bullying in the classroom, which is very easy for a teacher to step in and say, he'll like, I can hear the comments you're saying, you need to stop these comments? The problems start arising, when the kids are at home, they're in their bed, they've got their phones. It's very late at night. The kids have their phones. Parents are asleep or parents are in their room working, cyber bullying happens outside of the classroom. And the idea of banning smart phones in the classroom is not solving cyber bullying. In fact, it's really delaying it when teachers can't interfere, parents don't know about it, and that's kind of the view that we took. I only was in school a few years ago.

Taj:

And as someone who was very close to people who had been bullied or even in some senses had bullied other people, the idea of some of these off the shelf solutions such as ban the smartphone and you'll stop cyber bullying were things that people actually were seriously considering when really there was no research that suggested banning smartphones were practical. And from an anecdotal point of view, I was in school. I knew smartphones. Weren't the problem. because you ban a smartphone, they still get their computers. They've still got their iPad and they can still do it as much damage on their smartphone, on their computers or their iPads as they can on a smartphone. So it was an incredible task force. We made several suggestions to solve cyber bullying in Queensland. One of the ones that, I was quite happy with was this idea of providing a youth grant.

Taj:

So young people can apply for up to \$3,000 to come up with their own cyber bullying, social change campaign in their local school. So, if a young person, literally a grade 6 or a grade 12 student has an idea to solve a cyber bullying, they can apply to the state government for \$3,000 to come up with an event. A social change event or an ad, whatever it might be super open to solve cyber bullying. And it's rather than having kind of an overarching TV ad saying don't cyber bully, which like everyone gets the idea of don't cyber bully, but actually young people solving their own solutions coming up with problems to problems that they face on a day to day basis. To me is the best way of solving a problem. That's the Queensland Government understood that and they put, I think it was about a million dollars towards youth grants get young people solving cyber bullying within their own communities, within kind of, that was just one of the many, recommendations. So look, I was incredibly honoured to be part of that task force. The youth grants program was certainly one of the ones I was pushing for and they funded it. So it was, it was incredible, but banning smartphones, once again, similar to coding looks great and media, but isn't overly practical. And isn't very thought out in my opinion.

Ainslie:

Your Lego story, Taj, tell us about that.

Taj:

So, after starting the tech blog, I kind of thought, all right, well, like I really want the idea of a, do it yourself, tablet for kids. Like I love technology. I love writing about electronics on weekends. I, when my sister would be going to like swimming classes co-curriculars and what not, my like dream weekend was Mum and Dad dropping me to JB Hi Fi, Harvey, Norman spending like four hours there taking pictures of all the electronics using Dad's Canon camera and like literally spending a few hours there just to play with electronics, that was my dream weekend. That was a hobby. I loved it. And kind of, out of that, uh, Tony Robbins seminar for me, it was well a tech blog probably isn't going to change the world, but hey, instead of just writing about electronics one, I start my own and had this idea for do it yourself, tablet for kids, as easy as a puzzle, as fun as a computer game was the tagline, where kids could literally clip in the different pieces for their own Android tablet. And at the end, it was just like a puzzle. It would turn on and they could use it for, for school. I created a prototype really easily using the school's 3D printers, ordered off the shelf components, and the prototype was incredible. Like it was literally like a puzzle. They could click on the camera, they could click on the screen, they could click on the motherboard, uh, and started pitching it to a heap of different places. Media loved it. They were just like, there's this Indian nerdy kid pitching this, do it yourself tablet. They wanted me on, uh, all of their news outlets. So from Sunrise to the Today Show to 60 Minutes, everyone wanted me on that shows, which was like, which is amazing.

Taj:

The issue was we only had one prototype. So every single time a new media outlet kind of said, Hey, like do you want to come onto the show? I was like, yeah, like the answer was always yes, but they also realised that this device didn't look as good as they needed it to look for Media. So they started creating their own iterations of the device. We wanted it to look like. So like I showed them what it would look like. They took a photo of what it would look like, and then they'd create their own graphic, of what they thought it was going to look like. So, it looked like this Apple, like device, which was like beautiful, and we ended up selling like thousands of units, like a device that really never existed. We sold yeah, like literally thousands of devices, of pre-orders, cause the idea of a do it yourself, tablet was cool.

Taj:

I built it. I was the target market. I was 14 and thought, I want a do it yourself tablet, like who wouldn't want to do it yourself tablet. and had this concept, two years past we made very little meaningful progress and a parent had ordered that this tablet kit for that child's 16th birthday, the child had turned 18 years old, left school and moved out of home and that's still not received their tablet kit, and for some people we're taking like pre-orders anywhere between 5%, all the way to a hundred percent. So we turned into a business that was trying to deliver devices that were two years old. Anyway, long story short, two years later we realised this is not a good business. It's taken us 2 years to kind of create a prototype, that is now 2 years old.

Taj:

Hardware is difficult and if we're going to do hardware again, we would raise a huge amount of money. So we would raise 20, 30, \$40 million before starting the business rather than taking a few thousand pre-orders and then like, and then trying to deliver on it and thought, alright, well the hardest part of starting a business is like, what, in my opinion, the hardest part of starting a business is creating a, is actually selling a product. You can create a product that no one wants, but can you

create a product that people want and have actually pre-ordered two years ago and still aren't complaining that's how much they wanted this product, and the answer for us was, well, that probably is the hardest part of starting a business, creating a product that has so much demand that people don't mind waiting two years for it.

Taj:

Our problem was we couldn't actually generate the product that they waited 2 years for and thought, well, we've got an incredible amount of momentum here. How about we just teach other kids how to do the exact same thing. We can teach other kids how to start their own business. We can't really, we don't feel qualified teaching kids how to execute on their business ideas because we had no idea how to execute on the idea, but we can teach kids how to start them. And we started going around schools, teaching young people how to start their own business, start their own product, start their own service, just like I started this tablet business. And that's kind of what led us into Fiftysix Creations where we go into schools and teach kids how to start their own business. And now we also teach kids how to execute on their business and actually get them to commercialise, and actually deliver on the products that they sell. So, yeah, that's what, that's how we kind of transitioned from this do it yourself tablet, which was an amazing concept, but it was probably just too futuristic at that time.

Deb:

What's next for Fiftysix Creations.

Taj:

Yeah. Cool. So look, Fiftysix Creations, right now is an incredible social enterprise. I've been with the organisation for 6 years. I feel every six years people need a change and I think I'm probably at the stage where I need a new little project. So over the next few months, my time at Fiftysix Creations will be fading out. I've got, it will be an exciting new project. It's certainly not something that, it's, been something that I've wanted to do for quite a while. Fiftysix Creations we will still be there. And the organisation is at the stage where it's very, self-reliant, we've got the goal of educating 100,000 kids by 2025 where 60,000 kids in, we've got some amazing partnerships with Government, Corporates and that's something that I think is really exciting, but every six years you need new leadership every six years, you need a new change.

Taj:

And I think I've been like I started when I was 14. I'm 20 years old now. There's only so much, there's only so much you can do in an organization in six years, and I'm young. I think I need a new challenge and I'm ready for that new challenge. So look, I'll be sharing what I do over the next, four or five months. I've got four or five months with Fiftysix and then kind of look at, or what, when, when do I share this new organization? So look Fiftysix has provided me with an amazing opportunity. I've loved what I've done with Fiftysix It's with such an it's in good hands with the team it is with right now. But I think yeah, six years for me is the time where you've got to move on. If, I think if you look at a presidential term in the US, they kind of limit it to two to two terms, halfway through the second term for a US President. You kind of read some of the anecdotal evidence of who's actually running the country and, and more times than not, it's the, the people around the President, the Chief of Staff, it's the senior advisors that are really making the decisions for the President in the last two years of a Presidential term. And for me, that kind of struck a chord and said, well, after six years, if they can't run a country after six years, then for me, it's probably the right time to say, to, to give it to new leadership.

Ainslie:

Well, that's very exciting. We can't wait to hear what your news is, Taj soon,

Deb:

We will follow your journey, which will be incredibly successful in whatever you do.

Ainslie:

And so, with age diversity, then on boards, like ASX listed boards, or, even advisory boards, what are your thoughts being a young person and the challenges you face for age diversity on boards?

Taj:

Yeah, look, I think that's what, when I spoke at that Governance Institute national conference the other year, and that was certainly something that was discussed quite a lot. I fundamentally believe that not every single person on a board should be a young person, but I believe that if young people are going to be inheriting a lot of these companies, then in turn, we should have some form of representation either on the board of directors or on the advisory board. To me that provides some people talk, hey, we need, gender diversity. We need colour diversity, etc, but quite fundamentally, we're going to be inheriting these companies. They're either going to, they going to be creating products for us. We're going to be sitting on these boards at some point. So why not put us on these boards originally, Governments are doing incredibly well, uh, us on a number of Government boards.

Taj:

And it's not just me. It's lots of government is realising they are putting young people. They're going to be inheriting the country of the future. I'll putting young people on boards. And I think that's something that although governments are quite slow to react to some of the more innovative trends and that's the state governments have done really well today. Corporates are lagging behind when it comes to that, and it's certainly something that I would love to see. I kind of picked up a lot more, because intuitively it makes sense if you're going to put someone who's a different colour to you on a board, if you're going to put someone as a different gender, do you want a board and then have diversity then in turn, you better put someone who's kind of a different perception of life to you as well. So, look, that's the goal. It makes sense. It certainly, would be in the interest of some of the banks in particular, but who knows? That's, the long term vision governments are doing it. I'm glad governments are doing it and I encourage Corporate's to follow suit.

Ainslie:

Absolutely. Well, I think that's nearing our time all, we have time for today for our episode Taj, but thank you so much for joining us and your amazing insights and just hearing about the journey for Fiftysix Creations and, your ongoing journey from here. We're very excited to hear about that. So, we will be following you closely,

Taj:

Thanks guys. Thanks for having me.

Deb:

Thanks so much, Taj.

Taj:

Catch you later.

Ainslie:

Thank you, and thank you to all our listeners today, for another episode of YS Up.

Outro:

That's all for today until next time, happy podcasting. And remember if you're enjoying the show, check out our other episodes and all things governance at www.3ysowls.com.au.