

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 221



Transcript – Marianna O’Gorman has all the details to get you prepared for your next board meeting

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Mariana O'Gorman about how to prepare for board meetings. This is one of the topics that was suggested by the Take on Board community and I did a shout out asking for speakers. So thanks for taking the call Mariana.

Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me I am on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land to orders and culture. I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and indeed I recently joined a group called 'Directors for Yes', and I encourage others to support the Uluru statement from the heart to support Directors for Yes if you wish to and vote yes in the upcoming referendum.

Now, let me introduce Mariana. Mariana his passion is working on solutions for climate change. She is a professional board director and serves on the boards of the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA). Energy company, Stanwell and public policy think tank, The McKell Institute, Queensland. She serves on a committee with Chief Executive Women and on the Elizabeth Reid Network, committee and organisation to promote gender equality in politics. Prior to working as a company director, Mariana worked at the World Bank in Washington, in Canberra as an adviser to the Prime Minister, with Green Investment Bank, the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, and represented Australia at international climate negotiations. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Mariana.

Marianna O'Gorman 1:31

Hey, you very much for having me Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:33

It's good to have you back. I should say Marianne has already been on the Take on Board podcast, she's spoken an event on climate governance, oh, gosh, probably a year or so ago, I think in 2021.

And she gave 10 excellent tips for the boardroom on climate governance. So I'll make sure I put a lot link to that in the show notes as well. So you can hear Marianna's wisdom twice. Now, for that one, because it was an event, we didn't do the dig into your background. So I get the opportunity to do that now. So tell me about your upbringing. What lessons did you learn? What did you get up to what were the leading influences on how you thought and what you did?

Marianna O'Gorman 2:09

So my mum and dad were pretty selfless people. And they had a strong belief that charity starts at home. And so they kind of think, you know, if there's anyone that's homeless, or sick, or elderly or lonely in your extended family, that you really need to be focusing your efforts and intention, there. So I spent quite a lot of my weekends actually, with the elderly, with elderly relatives and bringing meals and keeping them company. So they had a real strong sense of, of service. And that kind of brought up purpose. It's always supported me with any idea I had, no matter how crazy it was. I remember though, when I was about 18, I wanted to go work, doing aid in Africa. And my parents quite quickly told me know, that if I, you know, had the those ambitions that I really needed to go work in remote indigenous communities first, and you and I've spoken a fair bit about the directors for the voice. And I guess a lot of the lessons I learned and the amazing culture and you know, basket weaving and learning how to cook underground and learning the art of the shaker leg dances and everything has made a big impression on me personally and throughout my career. And I'm also like you very supportive of directors for the voice.

So kind of from when I was in primary school, I did have a bit of an understanding and thought a lot about injustice, inequity, and the broader community around me, and I've worried a lot about it. I also would, could see that I wanted to work in climate change. For the rest of my life. I didn't realize that's what I was called. But I would tell anyone that listens, that I wanted to be a meteorologist because I had this fascination with the weather and weather patterns. But my favourite thing to do was Sunday afternoon at my aunty and uncle's. And that's where you'd have this really vibrant discussion of law and politics. And I just love listening to the tussle of ideas and was really drawn to that. So I can kind of you can see from a young age, that career in kind of climate change, policy and politics was there from probably age eight or nine. My aunty and he had this sticker on the back of our car that said, 'girls can do anything'. And so I grew up in this very strong matriarchal family with my mother who was would never call herself a feminist, but was a strong feminist and 10 Auntie's who would definitely call themselves feminists. And they call out bad behavior even 30 years ago, and would always make sure that they were really good examples for what women could and can achieve and that women could do anything. I was always given the same opportunities and beliefs that I could achieve the same as men. And I've worked a lot in gender equality over the last five years. And I think that's probably coming back to that formative ages of, you know, when you're eight, nine and those strong matriarchal women all around you.

Helga Svendsen 4:49

Oh, my goodness. I love all of that. Yeah, you can see exactly why you're involved in what you're involved in now. Did your mum have 10 sisters? Or is this

Marianna O'Gorman 4:59

My dad had 16 brothers and sisters, but yeah, and my strong Irish Catholic family. And my Nana was an orphan. So she grew up alone. And therefore, so she had, I think, 13 children naturally, and then adopted a number of orphans, one of whom actually was indigenous and has also played a really strong role in my life. Because she was an orphan. Yeah, she went out and not only adopted a number of children, but also I believe, over summers, host a number of the orphans as well. So they used to have three kids to a single bed, and they'd have triple beds.

Helga Svendsen 5:36

Oh, my goodness, I can't get my head around 16 Kids. That is amazing. Your Nan sounds incredible.

Marianna O'Gorman 5:43

He was she probably was one of the reasons for the strong matriarchal family with all of the Auntie's, but that was on my father's side. But as I said, wouldn't have called herself a feminist, but had a very strong sense of purpose and self. Yes.

Helga Svendsen 5:56

Oh, good on her good on all of them. Although we're not talking about any of those things. Today. Again, folks, if you want to hear Marianna's views about climate governance, go and listen to the previous episode that's in the show notes. Because today, we're talking about how to prepare for board meetings. So talk us through, talk us through for you, how do you prepare for board meetings?

Marianna O'Gorman 6:16

Yes, I, think preparing for board meetings is a little bit of a science and a little bit of an art. And I've got the science a bit down pat. So I've got five tips of things you need to do there, the art is really where it sets apart the good directors from the great and then that's more of a learning journey that I'm on. But when it comes to, you know, the five practical things I think you need to do as that science part of preparing for boardroom meetings.

The first one is really gathering that industry intel. So as soon as one of my board meetings finished, I had three of them for each of the last week, I begin preparing for the next board meeting. And that involves being the eyes and ears for the organisations that I sit on and trying to bring that unique perspective back to the board and the management. So I'll be talking to stakeholders, competitors, government customers, identifying opportunities for collaboration, I'll be, you know, this week of kind of meeting with some advocacy organisation, not for profits and some industry bodies. There's a key regulatory report coming out in my industry or make time to read that I have about 10, International and Australian podcasts that I listen to that keep me up to date with trends in my sector. And I usually have at least one book on the go. So that's gathering that industry intel, I think in between meetings, you also spend a fair bit of time doing things like your off site visits, or your working groups with board members or with management and listening to speeches, say of key regulators or government ministers that might impact the strategy of your organisation and the organisation's ability to execute it.

The next thing I'll work on is the governance skills. So Take on Board really helps with that listening to the Take on Board podcast. But yeah, taking time out in between board meetings to hone those governance skills. Again, reading the latest reports or guidance or speeches from the regulators that point you in the right direction. I use LinkedIn a lot to keep me up to date, particularly with international trends that you're seeing. So I can have an understanding of where the next governance issue will be for us over the next 12 months, that I need to keep up to date with, you know, attending those webinars, conferences, and making sure there's any education opportunities that making the time for it.

The next thing I've learned a little bit more from mistake is checking the minutes from that previous board meeting, I've spent a lot of time you know, seeking an agreement working with colleagues to prosecute an argument. And then six months later, I'll get a board paper. And I'll realize, Oh, they're raising that same issue again. So I'll go back to the minutes and I'll go hang on, we've you know, we've already dealt with this. And realize that the minutes haven't recorded the discussion and the conclusions that we reached, so I have to re prosecute things all over again. So checking those minutes and making sure that if you have secured an outcome, or something that's important that it is noted in the minutes, that'll help you preparing for a board meeting in 12 months time.

So really reading the board papers is probably that fourth thing and that's you know, only one of what I'd say 10 things in terms of preparing for the board meeting, reading not only the board papers, but also those extra papers that you know those background papers that links there that provide further context so that you are really well prepared.

And finally, then I'll list the questions that I have for the management. And I consider you know whether or not those questions are going to enhance the board's overall understanding and knowledge to be able to make a decision, or are they things that I need to work on or understand

and if it's the latter, then I try and seek answers to those questions ahead of the board meeting so that the board meeting can go quite smoothly and efficiently and not have to dig into issues that aren't really going to benefit my fellow directors.

So that's kind of the science of preparing for the board meetings. But really, the art is more that strategic thinking that needs to happen. I haven't mastered it yet. But I've worked around enough board directors who I have seen and the things I can see that they, you know, how they can hone their craft, and they, you can see that they have prepared mentally for the board meeting, I think the first one is they've considered the issues that they want to raise, they've stepped back, they've narrowed it down to whether or not those issues are strategic or whether they're operational, and they're not bringing operational issues into the boardroom. They have this really good ability to use silence to great effect, they understand that there is a time quota that each board member unofficially has and a personal capital quota, so that they can only use that time quota and their personal capital on a few select issues. And they've thought about which issues they're going to use that on.

Also, I think good, good chairs really work on that principle of no surprises. So if a board member does have some issues that they have communicated those to the chair ahead of the meeting, so that it's not a surprise to management and to management aren't coming to the meeting with new information that board members haven't really had a chance to read through.

The second thing I've seen the good directors do is really think about the goal of the meeting, they look at the agenda, and they see how that agenda aligns with the long term goals of the company, they think carefully about how to contribute to the strategic discussion, but more importantly, how they're going to enable their colleagues to contribute to the discussion. They have this kind of overall visions of the company. And they can articulate it with ease. And they can explain how each agenda item fits within that overall vision.

I'm a yoga teacher. So I think the third thing I've seen really good directors do is, you know, the beginning of a yoga class, you set an intention for your practice. And you can see these board members, you know, sometimes you show up at a board meeting, and everything just flows, and it's good, and everything's fine. But when things do get heated, you can see those that have kind of come. And they've set their intention, and they have their kind of game ready, they've prepared mentally for how they're going to behave in the boardroom. And they don't let unlike sometimes I do their emotions get the better off them. They can be direct, but they're respectful. And they come back to that, that intention when things get heated. These are the ones that really nurture their relationships outside the boardroom, with management, and with other board directors, one of your previous guests, Alex [Episode 214: Alex Tullio moved from executive to non-executive director with ease and has lessons to share] spoke about this cultivating a cultivating a culture of trust. And it's those directors that do really cultivate that culture of trust in the boardroom, which enables difficult

issues to be raised and brought to the board and discussed and to solutions to come out easy to think about, you know, the questions you have any issues you have, but then how are you going to present those to management? How are you going to deliver? How are you going to communicate that feedback. You see, in a board meeting, you might or I've oftentimes, you know, started the board meeting, maybe talking to the CEO and board members about how fantastic the pack is, and what a great organisation is in great direction that they're heading and how proud I am of them. But each exec oftentimes only comes in and out for their items. So they've missed all that, that context. And if it comes to that one prickly issue, and that one exec comes in, and you communicate a few things quickly issues you have, and they haven't heard any of the other context, then that's not really good for morale. It's not representative of your thinking of the organisation either. So taking that time to sit back and think about how you're going to communicate it. I've seen really good directors do it. Also managers, particularly when I've made some silly suggestions in the boardroom, talked about ideas that just are a bit whimsical and didn't really realize at the time. And rather than pulling me up at the time and arguing on the spot, or embarrassing me or providing me with evidence that would say this is ridiculous, those directors or those managers have thought, No, I'm going to prosecute this in a different way. I'm not going to argue here, I'm going to maybe let her take some time to think about it and come to that come arrive at her decision in her own time with her own evidence and just leave that for now. Or I'm going to get some other people outside the organisation to talk to her about what to do are addicted. So they can kind of not only communicate their feedback really well, they can choose when to communicate their feedback really well.

And the final thing I'd say, when it comes to that art is just the presence, you can feel those board meetings who bring that presence, that charisma into the board, meaning that they want to be there, they're there to listen, that they aren't distracted, that they're not on their phones and their emails, that they don't want to be anywhere else. But it's in that room with you talking about the issue and listening to the issues that you're talking about. And taking a few minutes before the board meeting to prepare for them and think, you know, am I going to be here and be present for the next five hours? Or am I going to be somewhere else is also important? Emotional preparation.

Helga Svendsen 15:50

Oh, my goodness, so much gold in there already. I love that the art and the science of it. I think sometimes the art and the science crossover a little bit in the middle. So I think often people think about board meetings, you know, you read your board papers, you think your questions, maybe you use one of the things you said on the outside, do a lens over it. Is this a strategic question? Or is this operational? A lot of people I think the board meeting stopped there. But that was number four, I think on your list. You've done all of this other thinking about the industry, about governance, or checking the minutes that's generally on people's list, but all of that industry, and governance, thinking that you do, because it was interesting to hear you start the next board meeting the day after or probably two seconds after the last one's finished and just continuing to build. What are the things that you found most valuable in that in that building of industry knowledge and building of governance knowledge? What are the things that you find most valuable? When you come back to

the boardroom at the next board meeting? How does that work in practice for you? Is there an example there?

Marianna O'Gorman 16:54

Yeah, you don't want to be coming back with management's view of what's happening in the industry, because you can't then provide the strategic guidance that they're hoping for, you do need to have some and you didn't need to read all of the reports that they're suggesting to and all the modeling or whatever it might be guidance that they're giving, but your ability to use your networks to reach into networks that your management don't have, and to see outside perspectives that might be hitting the organisation is really where you provide the most value as a board member? Yeah. Because that testing. So I do. Yeah, I spent a fair bit of time, I guess, particularly given my government background, talking to people in government and trying to understand where a lot of the regulatory side of things is, or policy side of things is going. And that's probably one of the more unique things. Yeah, I can bring to the boardroom and a sense of how that might be impacting the business in say, five or 10 years time.

Helga Svendsen 17:53

And you touched on it, a number of this about the building of relationships, building of trust, thinking about your communication, even sometimes in the building of the industry knowledge, you talked in there a lot about your connections and drawing on them and talking to people. What happens if somebody if you want to catch up with somebody for a coffee, or if they want to catch up with you for a coffee, tell me how that happens in practice?

Marianna O'Gorman 18:14

So I don't really catch up for coffees, I live on the Sunshine Coast land of the Jinibara peoples, so we're right between the rainforest and the ocean. So a lot of my meetings, ocean swims, they are rainforest walks, they are hikes with people like you, Helga. And I've got three little kids. So I can't work for all hours at all times. So if I'm meeting with somebody, it'll be for a run or for a walk, usually at four o'clock in the morning. But also, I think that's a really valuable way to talk with people, because most of the time you're not facing them, you're avoiding eye contact, and people then aren't reading into the cues that you're giving them with your body language, they're less prone to think that you're being judgmental, and they're more open. They're out in nature, more adrenaline going. So again, they're more open, and you start to get into deeper issues about what's driving them what they're thinking about, then you potentially would if it's just 15 minutes over a cup of coffee and actually, yeah, really get to know if it's under directors or if it's other people in the industry. Sometimes Sometimes people say no to that, but most of the time, people people are up for it.

Helga Svendsen 19:30

As one of the people who's done that Mariana and I hiked Mount Pomona.

Marianna O'Gorman 19:35

And a fellow had hiked it in 15 minutes that morning and then took it to taken us two and a half hours.

Helga Svendsen 19:41

But even that, like it's it takes you know, we drove there together you did pick me up early I think when you told me 4am, I was like oh God really all right, but anyway, wasn't I think it was a wee bit later than that. But your drive there. You go for the hike together. You don't just talk about. We didn't talk governance. We just talked life and that builds trust and builds relationships as well, which is what you'd also referred to as part of the art.

Marianna O'Gorman 20:03

Yeah. And particularly being climate change, being out in the climate and being out in nature is very much part of what drives me what inspires me. And you know, if I'm talking to people about oil and gas, sharing that passion and showing them that passion, showing them what a little baby shark looks like, for the first time, I hope can kind of enlighten that same spark that exists within me about protection of the environment.

Helga Svendsen 20:33

So people have said, I'd like to have a coffee with you. And you said, Now let's go for a swim. And people are up for that.

Marianna O'Gorman 20:39

Yeah, it is. Yeah. Awesome.

Helga Svendsen 20:40

I love that. Love it. I don't quite know how you do that virtually. You can do walks together virtually. You can just be on the phone.

Marianna O'Gorman 20:47

Yeah, I've got friends over in the US who will arrange 4.30. Let's go for a run together. And we chat work. So no, I definitely do that, you know, friends that I do online yoga with although doing yoga, and I've done a few yoga meetings, that people are a lot more open after the yoga session. But oftentimes yoga is more about the silence. So he kind of have a bit more of a discussion after the yoga ran during...

Helga Svendsen 21:13

Although even that's interesting, because you reflected on using the silence and being comfortable in silence, sometimes board meetings are go, go go, whereas sitting in the silence is a real art. I think it makes lots of people uncomfortable. So maybe yoga, sitting in that silence in yoga helps to build the muscle of sitting in productive silence in meetings as well. Mariana, so many wonderful tips in here on the art and science, of preparing for board meetings. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Marianna O'Gorman 21:43

I think it's mainly about the emotional preparation for a board meeting, as I've said, not something that I can practice yet, but it is the thing that does set apart those great directors from the good directors, so I do try to learn from them. And that that emotional preparation is as important as just doing the preparation of reading through the board papers.

Helga Svendsen 22:08

You've prompted for me as well, I did a well being in the boardroom program with a small group of people and we talked about starting board meetings differently. And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Marianna O'Gorman 22:21

Directly related to what we've been talking about, but I guess in terms of preparing for board meetings, and my strong focus on the climate change, many boards will soon have legislative climate change disclosure obligations. So when it comes to board preparation, I think reading the treasury consultation paper that's out on that at the moment will be a good thing to make sure your board is prepared. If you are a smaller organisation or your organisation doesn't fit within those treasury guidelines, you still have a duty of care when it comes to climate change duties and disclosure under the Corporations Act. And I've got another resource, which is the seminal legal opinion that spells out what that duty is and how to discharge it. So I'll leave those two with you in the show notes.

Helga Svendsen 23:09

Oh, that is fantastic. See, there's the combining the climate governance and preparing for boards. It's part of the industry kind of well, it's actually both it's industry knowledge and governance knowledge that you need, which is all key to preparing for board meetings are thank you so much, like I said so much gold in here. Thank you so much for returning to the Take on Board podcast to share your wisdom about this. I think it's given me a lot of tips to think about, and I'm sure it will be for others as well. So thanks for joining us here today.

Marianna O'Gorman 23:40

Thanks very much for having me Helga.

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