

# Sandra Loader - Take on Board

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, board, organization, governance, sandra, network, experience, thought, important, challenge, role, question, career, breadth, key, board meeting, gaps, understanding, building, skill

## SPEAKERS

Helga Svendsen, Sandra Loader



Helga Svendsen 00:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Sandra Loader. And we're going to focus on what it takes to get on a board and to be an effective board member. Sandra is the chair of the Australian Beverage Council and a non executive director of the Sports Environment Alliance and the Australian Institute of Food Science and Technology. She's also a member of the Advisory Committee for the New South Wales Government container deposit scheme. She was previously a non executive director of the Food Industry Association, and innovation startups such as the food Technology Center. Sandra is passionate about making a difference as a leader. She is the Victorian advocate for Hargraves Institute who focus on collaboration and innovation, where she mentors and provides thought leadership in technical innovation. She focuses on continued learning and curiosity that adds value to strategic plans, risk and governance. I first met Sandra in 2015, when she was looking to further explore non executive roles. And it was apparent to me then that she was a great thinker. She's also been part of one of my Board Accelerator programs. And I know from her input there that she has a knack for the right question at the right time. Questions that really make you think, which is a key skill for success in the boardroom. So I know that you're really going to enjoy my conversation with Sandra today, where we pull apart what it takes to get on a board, and to be an effective board member. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Sandra.



Sandra Loader 01:23

Thanks, Helga Great to be here today. And hopefully, I can share some of my insights and a little bit about my journey that might help others.

**H** Helga Svendsen 01:30

So Sandra, before we explore being an effective board member and getting on a board, I'd love to hear a little bit more about you. Can you tell me a story about young Sandra, that tells us a bit more about how you got to where you are today?

**S** Sandra Loader 01:43

Well, that might be too revealing. But I think we look, one of the things I'm really proud of is growing up in central Victoria. You know, in the country, it was all about community environment. And when I think back, when you asked that question, I thought, What story Am I going to tell. And that's what I love, I love the challenge of having to think differently. And one of the things when I was young that I guess really brought at home to me was observing my parents in the community and in the country, communities everything. And they took a very much a leadership role. But when I was young, I didn't look at that as being part of you know, boards or governance, I saw that is just something my parents did. So the key learning when I was young was just observing what my parents did, and the leadership role that they took, that really shapes and develops you, when you're young. And you build your values. And that's something that at the end of the day, it's very hard to instill in people. But you see that and observe that from watching other people. So a little bit about my childhood was you know, it was wonderful, I really enjoyed it. And I guess the other thing was really about challenge. And what I was given in, in my childhood was people who believed in me will challenge me to do things. So that has helped shaped my career, as I've been in the corporate sector for a long period of time. So challenges and other important aspect for me going forward.

**H** Helga Svendsen 03:13

What was your earliest experience of governance?

**S** Sandra Loader 03:16

Well, in all honesty, I really don't think I thought of it as governance back in those days. And maybe I was naive, but my corporate career gave me the opportunity to review and to look at governance from a different lens. And I had a career that led me into a space that I loved. As I said, I mean, I grew up in the country. And so my background was in food science, I did a Bachelor of Science and really focused on being close to that environment

and from paddock to plate, as they call it now. But I tell you, what, 30 years ago, it wasn't paddock to plate. And food service was my passion. And what I've done is certainly followed my passion, and one of my earliest experience was being involved in teams. And when I looked at what really shaped my career and the early exposure to governance, it was when I had my first role in the merger and acquisition space, and merger and acquisitions really do give you both depth and breadth, you might be a subject matter expert, but it gives you depth and breadth about an organization. And I was truly inspired by people that we worked with at the time on the m&a project of these subject matter experts that had both the depth and breadth, they were leading the project, and were able to be across every function. And I thought that's a real specialist skill, but then they could go very deep in certain aspects. So my early exposure to governance was well being across both breadth and depth, which I thought was really important.

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Helga Svendsen 04:49

What a fantastic experience mergers and acquisitions are a key governance, challenge or opportunity. So that's an amazing way to have an introduction into governance. So then thinking about getting on a board, how did you get your first board role?

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Sandra Loader 05:04

I always think it's good to be able to get onto a board when you're in a job. It's more challenging when you're outside of an environment where people don't necessarily need your skills or know you as well. So my first opportunity came when I was working with Cadbury Schweppes. And I became the chair of the Food Service Industry Association. Now back in those days, which was back in early 2000s, I wasn't thinking of that as a governance role or being on a board. But it was the chair of an association, which was a member based, and it was really trying to drive exposure and challenges for the members in that food service area. So I was leading a team of people, the association was ready to nearly go under, you know, like anything in those days, it was very difficult, and member based associations were quite challenged. So I went through that valley of death where you needed to take people on the journey, develop what the new vision would be, and the strategy, and then have people that believed in that and were prepared to, to follow and move with you. So that was my earliest experience. But I didn't see that as having a board position or an NED role in that space. But it came via being involved in an organization and then having a skill in a particular area that led to that being able to represent that association.

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Helga Svendsen 06:28

It's a great tip to use that day job that you have to leverage that into some sort of governance role. Even if you didn't think of it as a non executive role, it clearly was. So being able to use that. So then how did you build from there, what came next for you?

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Sandra Loader 06:44

I mentioned before about my parents taking leadership role in the community, I was probably one of these people that always put their hand up whether it was for the tennis club, whether it was volunteering in the local community, being involved in teams was also a passion passion of mine. And I think being involved in teams is critical, because you have to understand the diversity of people. And there's no one size fits all. So I was a coach, you know, of the netball team in the country area. And understanding I think yourself is really critical about your own capabilities. And also some hints about being true to yourself, that's really important to me about being true to yourself and trading people how you like to be treated. And if you you have some of those values, your purpose and values are what really links you to the boards that you become attracted to. And that you can see yourself adding value to my purpose of learning, inspire and give to make others grow is where I've got to, I didn't always have that purpose in mind, you know, in my early days of the career, but certainly later on, when I started to unpack what it is I was passionate about. And what I wanted to spend my time doing in my next chapter really became very clear to me based on the things I had done in my career. So understanding the self, I think is really key to getting on boards. The depth and breadth is also what I mentioned about a true inside about know what your area of expertise is. But that's not good enough. In this day and age, you need to be across all aspects of an organization, you need to also be forward thinking very strategic, you need to understand what the disruptors are going to be, you need to understand your own profile of how big a risk taker you are, and where your blind spots are. I think that's really important to have a conscious thought around those blind spots, because we all have unconscious bias. And in addition to that, you really need to listen hard, and I call it listening with a quiet mind. So if there's one thing you take away, it's listen with a quiet mind, because how often are we distracted, and not actually listening with a quiet mind to hear what people are saying and understand where they coming from and why they're coming from that position. If you don't ask the right question, as you mentioned earlier, you don't know whether they are subject matter expert in that, and how impactful that knowledge may be. I think the other aspect is about a diverse network how diverse your network is, is really critical. Otherwise, you will end up with a bias that's very skewed to someone similar to yourself, and so important to surround yourself by different age groups. And I learned so much from younger people, that's a really critical aspect of having a network and different sectors to what you're familiar with or comfortable in. And being pushed, and challenged by mentors or people that are close to you, when they believe and say something that you don't see yourself is

another critical component of you know, being in that board space

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Helga Svendsen 09:58

To pick up your last part of first building a diverse network. What are some of the things that you've done to make sure that you've continued to have a diverse network that you can draw on from those different sectors or age or whatever it may be?

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Sandra Loader 10:11

Good question, Helga, because I wouldn't have thought that was really important until I had a lady I reported to by the name of Trish Fields. And what I learned from her was, she built a team of people that had diverse skills, and they were all very different. And that was quite unusual to me and quite an eye opener, I think that was a very much a turning point for me. And most people go through their career, and they have a network, which is internal to an organization. And there was a point where one of the directors was moved on as the things happens with restructure. And that person didn't have an external network. And so from that point on, I was very focused on making sure I expanded my network outside the organization, particularly on those people that know what you can capable of doing in an organization, how do you build your network outside to get credibility. So one of the things I did was, I joined the goals group. And that goals group was, I guess, people connected with other people and came together for a purpose of just achieving your goals. So I was really good at achieving work goals, but not good at achieving personal goals. And that group was my first foray into a very different external network. So different sectors, totally different areas, and all people from young to very senior. And that was great exposure to building trust, because people were sharing goals, personal goals that they wouldn't even share with their parents. And so that level of trust, integrity, things that are important for governance, was through a similar mindset and a similar set of values of that goals group. In addition to that, I think it's putting yourself into areas that you're not comfortable with. So it's stepping outside of that comfort zone, and having the courage and courage is another key component of governance of how do you become courageous and particularly for women? Women are not good at being courageous. How many times do we see women that are speaking, whether it's movie stars, whether it's people in the media, whether it's people who have been successful, talk about the luck that they've had, or I was in the right place at the right time, women are not good at taking credit for what they do. And so we need to have a louder and proud of voice. And when I look back at my career, I was very much surrounded by men. And I probably became a little bit immune to the importance of what I needed to do to lead from the front. But when I talked to people that worked in the same organization, I get positive feedback. So maybe I was doing that more than I realized. But I think women

certainly have a role to play, sharing their voice loud and proud and claiming their own actions, movements, despite what people say whether they're aggressive, or, you know, not being true to themselves. I've always been true to myself. But I think it's important to be loud and proud. If you want to be successful, you need to be if you want to be on a board, you need to be able to speak your mind whether the tide is against you or not, because it might be that nugget that makes a difference to an organization.

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Helga Svendsen 13:22

So what are some of the things that you do to remind yourself to be loud and proud?

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Sandra Loader 13:28

A key thing is about making sure that inner voice doesn't take over. And that comes perhaps with more experience and more confidence. So suppressing that and saying, well, no one's telling you that it's just a thought, and really making sure you stay relevant. I've moved out of the corporate sector, and I've now got a mixed portfolio. And as part of having a mixed portfolio, if you're not careful, you can certainly become irrelevant very quickly. So a lot of the things that I learned and acquired over my corporate career, you know, you can find out on Google, or you can research and get that information fairly readily. So I now focus on making sure I put myself in positions where I'm learning more, I was at the Melbourne Business School, just recently, understanding about leadership disruptors. I went to a course in Sydney 12 months ago, that was talking about exponential leadership in organizations. So if you want to be on a board, you need to remain relevant. And you need to be pushing the boundaries of AI, new technology, data, all of the things that are going to be important, and that could disrupt the business you're representing. So staying relevant is critical in terms of what one needs to do. And that's putting yourself out there and taking risks in becoming a not necessarily an expert, but understanding the right questions to ask in areas that you need to be across. If you want to be on a board.

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Helga Svendsen 14:53

You've previously been the chair of a board, you're now a chair of the board. I'm wondering, in particular, in your role as a chair, what do you like for when you're looking for other board members? What are some lessons people can take from that?

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Sandra Loader 15:05

Look, I think it's really about one, making sure that you're linking the skill set of your board

with the strategic agenda. And we can get comfortable being on boards with people we trust and if they work similar to the way we have, or if you've been on boards with them before. But the true test, I think, is really critiquing and reviewing their board, CV, and that's different to a normal CV is their experience backing out what they're saying this strong in. So that becomes a key insight. Also speaking to people who may know them, and having seen them operate in that environment. But more importantly, have you got the right mix of skill set on the board to deliver the strategic agenda. So whether that's from member base organization, and ASX listed organization, banking, there is so much scrutiny on boards these days, as we all know. And therefore, you need to be able to demonstrate that you have done as much work if you're applying for a board role, as well as researching the applicants to come on to the board.

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Helga Svendsen 16:20

And indeed, one of the things that I often say to people, when they are looking for a board is to research the organization as well, people will be researching them, but also find out as much as you can. I'm sure you've seen this as well, you can tell when you're interviewing somebody, and they've really done their work on the organization.

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Sandra Loader 16:38

Absolutely. It's good when you apply for a role to to see what it's really like, and how that operates. One of the key things that was important to me when I was looking for board roles was also about what is it I'm passionate about? Where do you want to spend your time and do your values align with the organization. And because of the liability these days, people need to go in with their eyes wide open, that you need to be working on something that you absolutely believe in and that you can add value to. And if your skill set can add value to that board, I really suggest that you question the why. Because being passionate about something and being prepared to spend time working on that. It's a large commitment, and there is no being halfway in. You're either all in or all out.

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Helga Svendsen 17:29

So Sandra, then I'm wondering about this concept of being an effective board member and being your best in the boardroom? What are some of the things for you that you've shown in your practice to be really effective?

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Sandra Loader 17:43

I think one of the key things is making sure you're present. And by that I mean all of you're

making a commitment to be available for all board meetings, committee meetings, you need to do the over and above switches, researching your competitive set out there, understanding what's going on in the media, because reputation is such a key component of how boards can unravel very quickly in the environment of change that we live in today. So reading the Board papers, using your experience to go further and deeper because you get the reports from the CEO, but how do you know? That's all the information they have? Or are they being selective? So probing questions, using your experience to make sure that bad news travels fast is another cliché that we hear often. And I think that's critical. So it's really about immersing yourself. It's not acceptable to not understand - whether its financial reports, whether it's legal ramifications. Any aspect It is your responsibility to research that. We all have a network with a subject matter expert that we can tap into to say, "I don't understand what this means, help me understand". So you can do that outside of any board meeting to come up to speed. And the thing I like about the network that I've built, and you know, this is a plug for you earlier is being on a surrounded by a group of other women on boards. And it's not just women, there's plenty of men as well. But I've found that having that diverse network of people from the Board Accelerator program has allowed us to have different experiences in different areas. And if we need a contact or if we need a further understanding, I have a network I can tap into to get that deep understanding where I have a gap. And I think critical is about understanding your gaps and taking action to close down those gaps in your capability.



Helga Svendsen 19:47

I love that idea of calling on people to go through a particular issue, whether it's as you mentioned, finance or legal or anything else strategy,



Sandra Loader 19:55

Whatever it may be with the proviso it's all confidential. And so you're not using company names or that it's in a way that doesn't break any confidentiality. So just be sure that that's also covered off.



Helga Svendsen 20:08

I know it's a it's a common thing that directors do. And they call on others for that expertise and for that input. So in a practical way, how do you balance those things about getting some advice around whatever it may be finance or issues or whatever?



Sandra Loader 20:21



I think it's about building a scenario without the actual facts. So there's ways to interpret that so that you get the insight to say, Well, if you've got three options, and one strong in this one's you know, going to cause a different aspect or issue or risk. It's how do you get the balance? Right? And I think it's about just using your experience. And we have to remember, you don't need to know everything. And sometimes it is necessary to ask for help. And if you don't have the answer, or you're not as okay with something, then you need to call that you need to call that in a board meeting and say, Look, I'm not across that as much as I can. I need some more support to understand where you're coming from. So you can still challenge your colleagues as to why they've come to a position, why they're advocating the way they are by truly understanding why and getting them to share experience. But you shouldn't really do that in advance of a board meeting if you've got a gap in a particular topic that is on the agenda.

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Helga Svendsen 21:20

And again, I think it's a great point to test out some of the colleagues on some of their views about things. I've certainly heard from other board members, both from boards, I'm on and the boards that I'm on. And I'm thinking particularly in relation to finance, that often the accountants on say, the finance committee or on the board, they actually love to be tested by the non accountants, because the non finance people often ask those different questions. So whether it's in the boardroom, prior to the board meeting, or at the board meeting, testing people out on their views is a actually a value, add those that don't have that key expertise and to test them out. So it's Yeah, it's great advice.

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Sandra Loader 22:00

Another thing that unlocks that is, we all have a responsibility. We talk about feedback in a lot of different ways, and understanding your capability gaps, and if there is a gap. But one thing that I think wasn't well done, you know, and I'm going back to when I was coming through my corporate career is fair and frank feedback. And people come into roles with the expectation that because they've been either promoted or that they're great, when it's about really understanding yourself and acknowledging where you have gaps. So can I just put a call out as a key thing, give their and frank feedback to the people that you're guiding, mentoring, coaching, leading as teams, because if they don't truly understand where their gaps are, they're not going to be the best people in those roles moving forward.

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Helga Svendsen 22:52

And it's also a key reason why board evaluations are so important. One of my boards for

our previous board evaluation, we will all individually assessed by everybody else on the board can be quite confronting, hearing that feedback, but also just incredibly valuable to also hear that feedback and to work through it.

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Sandra Loader 23:10

And remembering that usually balanced, you know, so it's play to your strengths, but address your weaknesses. That's the key.

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Helga Svendsen 23:17

So again, kind of flip that around, what are some ways that you get your feedback around your performances of board director, at committees at board and so on.

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Sandra Loader 23:27

So I think if there's something you particularly working on, like, if you're wanting to be more impactful, then it is calling people side and say, "Look, I'm working on trying to improve in this particular space". At the end of the meeting, if you can, you know, give me your observations of "Did you see any difference, because I've been trying a few different things", sometimes that's a good thing to do, you wouldn't do it with every board director, because obviously there's a vulnerability in that. But usually, you've got a couple of colleagues that you would feel comfortable in in doing that. However, as you said, board evaluations are really critical. But be careful not to just focus on all the negatives or the gaps, because then that becomes you know, a spiral of Am I good enough, and that voice coming up again. So you make sure you use the strengths in combination with those areas that you want to enhance, but with a purpose. What's the reason you want to be more impactful? You know, is that because the board needs that or it's too polarized, or whatever the case might be? So thinking of it, and you know, all your action should be with purpose.

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Helga Svendsen 24:34

I mentioned in the intro, Sandra, that your ability to ask fabulous questions is something that has really stood out for me in your participation in the programs and other interactions I've had with you. I'm not sure if this is even an answerable question, but I'll ask it anyway. Where do you get the inspiration for these questions? How is it that you managed to ask the right question at the right time?

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**Sandra Loader** 24:58

Think it comes back to your experience going on a board requires as I mentioned, and I'm very passionate about this depth and breadth. And if you've had experience and my experience hasn't been with a lot of different organizations, but for someone with 30 years of fmcg, I've worked in a couple of different countries. But I've worked in most functions. And being working in most functions gives you a true appreciation of what how those functions operate. And therefore, to me that gives you a lens of experience of what's the right question to ask. So that to me, the depth and breadth of your skill set is really important. So my experience in m&a, I was also in sales. But my background is technical. I'm a food scientist and a with a science background. But my upbringing as well being part of teams, and I guess my roundedness and an individual doing things that I was passionate about, allow me to immerse myself in most aspects, I was in part of an organization that then merge five organizations together, you mentioned the cultural change that you need to go through and keep everyone on the journey. Building a new culture within an organization with five acquisitions that happened in the space of probably two years, from very small family owned businesses to a big corporate conglomerate, then owned by a Japanese organization. So the combination of that, man, he can't rest on your laurels. And it doesn't just stop there with your experience. It is also about continuing, I call it remaining relevant. And remaining relevant is how does someone who has had 30 years in the past, demonstrate that they have the mindset and the transferable skills for the future. And you can only do that by understanding where we're heading as a country as a from global influences, and therefore surrounding yourself with millennials as well, and how they think and what they do differently. Because we all know, the old ways of working are not going to be relevant for the new ways of working. But it's the wisdom that you can take from that, that I think links the success for the future.

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**Helga Svendsen** 27:27

One of the things you had mentioned, I'm thinking about a resource for our community, you'd mentioned that exponential organizations by and I hope I'm pronouncing this correctly, it's a Salim Ismail was one of the resources that you suggest for our community. What is it about that makes it such a good resource?

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**Sandra Loader** 27:43

Well, this was one of the courses I mentioned that I went on last year. And it was run by the growth faculty, but was bought by the Singularity University who forward thinking in what is the leadership model going forward? And why do we need to adapt? And why do we need to change. And it challenges, I would say, the majority of business models that exists

today, and if you're on a board, and you're working within a business model and your experiences been in similar business models, then you're not going to remain relevant if you don't ask the questions of what future organizations are going to look like. And those organizations will have less assets, flexible employees, and the way they operate will be very different. And what drives them will be more around data and technology. And so you need to find the transferable skills and the knowledge base to cross the bridge in order to be effective as a director.

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Helga Svendsen 28:44

And so if this conversation that we've just had today had been a board meeting, and you were chairing that meeting, how might you summarize what we've talked about today? What are some of the key takeaways for people?

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Sandra Loader 28:54

One of the key takeaways for me, Helga is, I really, when you asked me to do this podcast, thought, really, but what I do is, I accept the challenge that people put out there. And by accepting that challenge, it helps me to, to research deeper into my thoughts, and what I think and how I can take those challenges into being effective moving forward. So the reflection is, continue to be risk taking, don't stay in your comfort zone. Because when you're confronted with those challenges, you can surprise yourself my other insights is really know yourself and take action to be true to yourself, and your purpose, because that is when you are more effective as a as a director.

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Helga Svendsen 29:45

And finally, again, if this was a board meeting, and we were putting together the action sheet for it, what one or two actions that you can suggest for our community to take.

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Sandra Loader 29:56

I think "how diverse is your network". So have a look at that in a quick way to do that is names of your most trusted people down the left hand side and across the top, start to look at how diverse they are. age, race, we all know the the list of diverse areas. So it's not just male, female, it's far greater than that. If you've got a true diverse network, you'll be tapping into being relevant and adding value.



Helga Svendsen 30:23

Fantastic. And in fact, I think you've got a bit of a tool for people to map their network. If you're happy. What we might do is put a link to that in the show notes for this so people can use that as a happy to really happy to help you. Thank you Sandra. I've loved our conversation and I know others are going to take just an amazing amount of wisdom from me. So thank you for being part of the take on board podcast.



30:45

pleasure. Thanks Helga.