



Take on Board

Transcript – Maree McPherson

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Maree McPherson about her journey into and out of the boardroom. First, let me tell you about Maree. Maree is the former chair of the Gippsland Regional Partnership and a former member of the Regional Development Advisory Committee, and the Victorian adult community and further education board. Maree is a leadership coach, facilitator and author. She writes about regional leadership and the contribution of regions to nations and is interested in how women lead in regional and rural Australia. Maree works with teams and individuals in leadership development, building influential cultures and improving opportunities for emerging channels. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Murray.

Maree McPherson 0:42

Helga, it's great to be with you. I'm so excited to be one of your guests.

Helga Svendsen 0:49

Well, and what people in the background might not know is this is our second crack. I tried to record this because we had some technical issues the first time so it's doubly exciting to be back and seeing if we can make it work today. See if the internet gods are with us.

Maree McPherson 1:01

Indeed, I feel like we should be popping champagne corks or something.

Helga Svendsen 1:06

Let's do that when it's finished. So, Maree, before we talk about your journey to the boardroom, as always, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me about your upbringing? And what lessons you learned from that? What you've got up to and what the leading influences were on you?

Maree McPherson 1:24

Oh, that's such a loaded question. Helga. It's one, it's one that always makes me smile, because it brings out the desire for me to tell several stories. But one of my favorites is a story that I tell in my first book, which is of being a 12 year old girl guide. My father was a scouting district

Commissioner. So bit of a conflict of interest, like is that there was a billy kart Derby that used to run in our district every single year. And it had never been opened to guides. It was always scouts and venturers. And so I put up a petition with my guide patrol that we wanted to enter our own Billy cart in this race. And because of my dad's influence, we were able to do so. And so we were the first guide troop to ever be part of this adventure. And there were prizes for speed, of course, but there are also prizes for scouting knowledge. And our patrol won the first prize for scouting knowledge, which I think was hilarious given we were a bunch of Girl Guides. And then they up shot. the really fun part of the story here is that my now husband was a scout who was in the audience when we collected our prize. And he can remember sitting there thinking, those girls, damn those girls fancy being allowed to be in our Billy kart race, and then they take out the prize for knowledge. So little did he know that many, many years later, he would marry that guy that was standing on front on stage. So I think that's a hilarious story. And it probably says a lot about my upbringing, and my father's influence over enabling me to be whatever I wanted to be.

Helga Svendsen 3:10

Oh, my God, I love that story for so many reasons. And, and you're right, it's influenced. I mean, you said there about the influence of your father or making things happen. But you presumably like it's how you use your influence of your own network and your father's in that network. So you probably exerted a little bit of influence on him as well. Oh, my God. And I love that I suspect your husband every now and again, still thinks damn those girls. But that is a fabulous story. And again, it's interesting to hear about Girl Guides. There are lots of women that I speak to, who got their first leadership experience through the Girl Guides, an amazing organization supporting girls and women into leadership.

Maree McPherson 3:56

I think so many of those kids organizations, you know, scouting Victoria guides Victoria, there are so many organizations, including sporting organizations that give young people leadership experience, and it is phenomenal. It's not all about baking cakes, and doing badges to make tea guides do amazing things. They do incredible things. And the experiences are very rich. So I'm very grateful that I had the opportunity to be part of that organization and to have as much fun as we did and to get muddy and build Billy carts and go on hikes, as well as learn to bake cakes.

Helga Svendsen 4:35

Oh my god, have you got a photo of yourself on the podium with the building card and winning the prize that would be such a magnificent kind of symbol of young women's leadership.

Maree McPherson 4:46

We possibly have photos of us collecting the prize but I don't have a copy. But I do have a picture of us about to take off. So we're all clean and tidy. And then there are a few pictures of us crossing rivers. Holding the belief above our head getting drenched in the rain and covered in mud. So yeah, I have a few pictures that are a great representation of that time.

Helga Svendsen 5:13

I love that. Thank you so much for sharing that story that is magnificent. And hey, if the photos handy send it through, we might even share a link to that as well, because I would love to see it. I suspect others will too, having having heard the story. So, you know, in what might be not the greatest segue, but you know that Billy cut journey is sometimes the same journey people experience in the boardroom, they come in or bright and shiny and clean and excited. And they go through the trials and the tribulations and come out a bit muddy, a bit worse for wear, but sometimes also triumphant. So I'm wondering about your journey to the boardroom. Tell us where that journey started?

Maree McPherson 5:55

Helga, I look, I think it's a wonderful metaphor, it was unintended on my part. But I do think it's a wonderful metaphor, because of course, you end up in places in the boardroom where you may never have expected to be. And sometimes it is a little battered and bruised and muddy. And sometimes it is feeling like you've won the prize. But my journey started when I was working as a regional director in a nonprofit, and was making the transition out of that role into my first co gig. And so was cutting my teeth as a CEO, if you're like, I'm cutting my baby teeth, and learning how to report to a board. And it occurred to me that in being a CEO, it might be useful for me to be on a board external to the organization. And that philosophy was what would lead me into the boardroom for the first time. And I've maintained that every CEO should be on a board outside. And every board director should have some experience as well, in an executive level in an organization. Because bringing that lens to the work is so critical. What I found was that being on my first board meant I could think like a director. And when my directors were asking me questions as a CEO, I knew where they were coming from, I could almost preempt. Gee, I wonder if they'll want to know about this? I wonder if they'll see a risk in this that I'm not saying. So that was what led me into my first board role.

Helga Svendsen 7:30

What was the board that you joined? And how did it happen?

Maree McPherson 7:32

So the very first board that I joined was, it was probably more of a committee of management in the own. So it was it was another nonprofit organization, they were a housing and support services organization, and was such a valuable experience for me to sit and listen to the kinds of questions that other committee members had. And to then go on the journey of doing the company directors

course, attending some governance training, really getting myself immersed in what it meant to be governing an organization. And of course, what that taught me was some of the skills that I needed as a CEO as well. So doing those two things together, meant, you know, wonderful opportunity to learn more about the role that I was being paid to do. And the external roles, which at that point were unpaid. So that Yeah, that was my first committee of management. And from there, I went on to be involved as a non executive director in a Health Fund. And, you know, several of the boards since then, up until the most recent ones that you mentioned in my introduction,

Helga Svendsen 8:48

and indeed, your governance experience. So you've become the chair of a number of boards as well. Tell us about that. how that came about. Were you on the boards first and then became the chair Did you sweep in as the new chair? And how did you find the experience? What's the important things for a chair to know?

Maree McPherson 9:05

Yes, so in my chair experience I've been appointed from from outside. So in the most recent experience, of course, the Regional Partnership was a new initiative. So I was the inaugural Chair of the of the partnership, the Regional Partnership

Helga Svendsen 9:21

What is that because it could be anything. Tell us what the Regional Partnership is.

Maree McPherson 9:24

So regional partnerships. Helya are an initiative of the Victorian Government, and they were initially only in regional Victoria, there are now Metropolitan partnerships as well. And their role is, in my language, not the state government's language. I see their role as being an ear to the ground, and an eye on the ball of the key priorities that that exist in each of the regions. So in gippsland, very much my role as chair was to convene regional assemblies across gippsland where many hundreds of people had an opportunity to provide insights and comments and priorities for the region's future. And I was also there to chair the meetings, which consisted of a number of community members who were appointed by government appointed by the Minister. All the CEOs of local government in in the region are part of these partnership committees, and regional directors of each of the state government departments. They're not voting members, but they are, if you like, ex officio, and provide advice into the process, so they pretty amazing public interventions is probably the best word I can think of. So it's a fabulous piece of public policy. And the partnerships inform state budget priorities. But more importantly, they probably are about shifting policy direction. So government's got its hand on a lot of policy leaders. And the partnerships are able to give confidential advice into

ministers to say, this isn't working in our region, this is having this impact. What can we do to shift? And of course, last year during lockdown, and through the pandemic, providing some of that advice was really critical.

Helga Svendsen 11:19

How did you become the chair? And how did you find your role as chair? You know, what was the influence that you could use in that role? And what makes a good chair?

Maree McPherson 11:29

Hmm, so I became the chair because I applied my hat in the ring. So there was a formal application process, a number of people had sort of nudged me towards that. And it had taken me a while to, to see that I was being led down that path quite strongly by a number of people, and was appointed by the Minister. And the second part of your question was, what was it like to be the chair? As always, I think as always, it was nothing like I expected and everything like I expected that Billy can't ride. Very much like that. Billy cut rod, you know, I'm not think of a better metaphor in hindsight. So you know, the initial induction was all about, you'll be chairing this many meetings per year, you'll be running a regional assembly and not much else. And of course, that was nothing like, Yes, I chaired a lot of meetings. Yes, I ran some regional assemblies. But they were also presentations to cabinet committees, there were relationships with key stakeholders that needed to be juggled and attended to. There were people who were interested in getting funding for their ideas that were beating a path to my door on a regular basis, until they realized I didn't actually have money to give away or grants programs that were in hindsight, in retrospect, I don't think I realized what an influential role it was. When I look back on the things that have been achieved in the region, over those four and a half years, and, and hence, it was a hugely influential role, and I possibly didn't realize that at the time that I applied.

Helga Svendsen 13:13

And so the the other side of this, you'd said before, you've been on a lot of boards, you've had a lot of board experience, way back to that committee of management that you were first on, through to chairing this Regional Partnership, and others in between. So, you know, a key thing for boards is offer getting on boards is, you know, knowing when to put your hand up and when to apply when people have tapped you on the shoulder a little bit. But it's also you must have moved off a number of boards, you must have worked out when it was the right time to get off the belly card. Just to really continue that metaphor. Tell me your thought processes there about when you've been on a board or a comedian and major contribution? How do you get off, it can be really difficult to do.

Maree McPherson 14:01

That's such a it's such an insightful question Helga. This is something I'm really passionate about, because I think we run into two camps really possibly three. We've all heard of founder syndrome. And we've all met the people who never leave who stay in their roles, you know, whether they be chair or deputy or in a membership role. And they don't exit because I suspect partly it's to do with not knowing quite how, partly it's to do with, you know, the commentary that other stakeholders run which is we can't do without you. You're indispensable, which of course, we know is rubbish. We're all dispensable. And I think partly it's to do with ego, you know, it's very addictive, to feel like you are doing good. It's a very powerful feeling and it washes over us and it makes us feel warm and fuzzy. And that's not to suggest we're not doing good in many things. And says we're doing immense good. But it's about recognizing, how am I feeling about this role? I think it's a little bit like when you're in a job. And for me the feeling comes from, am I feeling a sense of annoyance or remorse or regret fullness about the time that I'm giving? What am I starting to notice? In my observations? Am I getting a bit prickly about the questions that other directors are asking in this meeting? Am I feeling like in this round of strategic planning that I've heard it all before? What are some of the signals that are coming to me? What's the data that's coming at me? What am I hearing in my own language? And what do I do with those observations? That's the telling part. For me, if I'm starting to notice those things, then there's probably something going on that I need to pay attention to.

Helga Svendsen 15:57

Oh, my God makes so much sense Morais and so sensible. But I'm wondering, because that says to me, unsurprisingly, that you are a very self reflective person, and have the ability to ask you to notice and to ask yourself those questions. What's your advice to board members? Who might be seeing that in others on the board table? But those others can't see it in themselves? What are some ways others can help them have that reflection?

Maree McPherson 16:29

That's such a great question. And it's a hard question, you know, this stuff is not easy. Having these conversations can be really difficult, because as you say, sometimes people can't see it in themselves. But sometimes they can. And they don't know what to do with it. And so it can be a really hard conversation to have. And what I've observed happening is people do two things to those individuals, they switch off and stop listening. And so they're almost shoved to the side as becoming irrelevant feather dusters, or they become antagonistic towards them. And I got myself into hot water A while back, where I said to someone else on a committee that I was part of, I think we've got to bring compassion to this conversation. And they didn't understand where I was coming from. It's like, why would we bring compassion, this is I think this individual doesn't see what we see. And we don't treat them with compassion, and a bit of empathy, then we are at risk of falling into this antagonistic space, or not valuing the good they do bring. Because whilst they might be getting a bit long in the tooth and tired or not contributing in the way that they could best, there are still some gems in there. They're often the critic that brings insights that others don't say. So for me, I think the the conversation is about bring compassion into it, and enquire, you know, use some appreciative inquiry. What are you seeing here? What are you noticing? I've noticed that you've been doing this

role now for about 15 to 20 years, over that period of time? I know you're laughing because I'm being extra. No,

Helga Svendsen 18:11

But it is absolutely sometimes the case it was it's extreme, but also sometimes the reality. true, it's

Maree McPherson 18:17

true. You know, what have you seen change over that time? How much heavy lifting? Are you doing right now? You know, is it time for some other people to start doing some of the hard work that you have such a long legacy in doing? I have quite a gentle approach. So that really fits my style. Others who are listening today might be thinking that To hell with that, I haven't got time for that. So I guess you can push it along a little bit. But for me, it is about having those inquiring conversations, ask questions, be nuanced about the questions. And you would point out to people, you have done a lot of the work, you have done a lot of the heavy lifting. Is it time for somebody else to step in? And and do some of that? What could you give up? What would you like to retain? You know, opening up the conversation is brave, but it must be done?

Helga Svendsen 19:09

Yeah, I agree. treating them with compassion, I think is fantastic. And I must say, you know, I think I know the answer to this question, but I'll ask it anyway. What's your view about maximum terms on boards, then?

Maree McPherson 19:21

I strongly believe in maximum terms on boards. And I, you know, I think what I've seen work really well, is maximum of three by three. So I think nine years is enough. I've never stayed that long in a part of, in fact, you know, in my most recent board, the Regional Partnership, I did one term, and then it was time was time for someone else. I very much viewed myself as the inaugural chair to get the thing established, but I wasn't there to be the long term chair to continue it. For me, that legacy piece is really important. It's, you know, what is my role here? What have I joined this board to do? And then what is the way to say that through? What's my timeframe. So almost starting with the end in mind, it's a little bit, evaluation of a program, start off with some questions to yourself, which then will help you determine how long you're going to stay. There's one example where I was thinking about stepping down from a board, but I knew the work I wanted to to achieve wasn't quite done. So I gave myself another line in the sand, you've got 12 months to do this. If it's not done by then you're out. But this, you know, it's really about being very clear about what needs to happen within that time frame.

Helga Svendsen 20:40

Yeah, it's, it's interesting about, I mean, unsurprisingly, perhaps I'm also a fan of maximum terms. I think a three by three you've talked about is reasonably standard, not always the case. My first board was the YWCA, Victoria and we had to buy three terms. And part of what I love about having a maximum term or defined term is that you can then really set your objectives for each term as well. You know, we had a conversation recently at one of my board accelerator groups where, you know, we come together once a month, and have a different topic each month, and we had a conversation about your vision and objectives for each term. So what might be your vision and objective for your first term, the middle term, and for your final term, not that you have to do all of those, but thinking that of them as different pieces. And often that final term, the legacy term, people do have different objectives in it. And there's a bit of courage, I think that comes with the final term as well, you know, you're coming off. So you can pick up on some of the things that you might not have managed to achieve in the first couple of terms as well and pick up the pace on some of those things.

Maree McPherson 21:52

I think that's so true. And the the use of you know, your use of the word courage is spot on. I think those last few months is a time and I think this is true for CEOs leaving organizations as well. It's very similar. I think there's a time where you say, Okay, well, this is what's left. And here's the things that really matter. And these are the things I'm going to be talking about. Not that you're going to raise a whole lot of stuff that you didn't do throughout the day. But it perhaps has more urgency, and a great opportunity to be testing with other people. Am I still on track here? These things are really important to me. Are they important to you as well?

Helga Svendsen 22:32

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, very fantastic conversation. The Time goes ridiculously quickly. So you know, we've talked about into the boardroom, on the boardroom and out of the boardroom, what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today,

Maree McPherson 22:51

there's three key points, I would love people to focus on hellyer. And they are, leave a legacy be absolutely clear about why you've joined the board, start with the end in mind, so that you can leave a legacy. Don't stay beyond your welcome. Nobody needs that Least of all you and exit elegantly. I think it's really important to exit elegantly, you know, leave with an intact reputation, and leave everybody else intact in the process.

Helga Svendsen 23:20

And is there a resource that you would like to share with the take onboard community,

Maree McPherson 23:24

There is Helga, my resource that I'm going to share with you today is a book by my friend and colleague, Kate Christiansen, and it's called Curly Conversations for Teams. Now, Kate intended this book for teams in organizations. And it's about helping people dive into discomfort and dare to do things a little bit differently. Now, when I read it, I read it from the lens of, you know, teams and organizations. But it's got some great insights as well for people in governance. So clearly conversations for teams by Kate Christiansen, I'd love people to get a copy of that book. And check out Kate's work, because she she's got some really good insights into how to ask some different questions.

Helga Svendsen 24:11

Fantastic. And we'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes. And indeed only because you said friend and colleague, she might want to share her wisdom on the Take On Board Podcast as well, Maree, so if she's up for that, let me know when we might get her on. Because you're right, Kelly conversations. That's what it's all about in the boardroom. So there might be some wisdom that can be shared there as well.

Maree McPherson 24:31

I reckon she would be a great guest on your podcast, Helga. I interviewed Kate on my Afternoon with an Author program a little while back and fabulous insights, I'd highly recommend her.

Helga Svendsen 24:43

Fantastic. Oh, Maree, thank you so much for sharing your time with us not just today, but also about a month ago when we couldn't get the technology to work. So thank you for coming back to it. Thank you for sharing some of those stories and those fantastic tips. I know people in the community We'll get a lot from it. So thank you for being with us on the Take On Board Podcast today.

Maree McPherson 25:04

Absolute joy. Helga. And if any of your listeners want to know more about my work, I've got some governance giveaways that I'll be sharing. And we'll add those, we'll add those to the promo for the podcast so that people can download them. So there'll be a guide to seven key questions that new

CEOs should ask when they start their role. Seven simple questions to help boards ground truth. And I'll be bundled together as two articles as a governance given giveaway for your listeners. So my pleasure to share that.

Helga Svendsen 25:37

Fantastic. So we'll obviously put a link to that in the show notes as well and make sure it's folks if you're listening to this, like I do when you're out for a walk, and you think, Oh my god, I want to get hold of them. But the show notes are going to disappear. As soon as I finished listening to this podcast, make sure you go to the take on board website because all of the shownotes are also on the website so you can go back to it when you finished your walk or commute or whatever you might be doing whilst you're listening to this podcast. Fabulous. Thank you, Maree. It has been an absolute joy. And yeah, I know people will get quite a lot from the conversation. So thanks for being with us.

Maree McPherson 26:13

Absolute pleasure, Helga. Thanks for inviting me and I've loved it. What a great conversation.

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