



Take on Board

Transcript – Megan May

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Megan May about her experience as a mentee and her journey as a young female director. First, let me tell you about Megan. Megan is a board member of Ballarat Community Health. She joined the bch board as a green 27 year old health professional and small business owner. Six years later, she now chairs the Quality of Care Committee and has just completed the Australian Institute of Company Directors course. During this time, she has listened challenged ideas, breastfed a baby at board meetings and learned a lot. Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast, Megan.

Megan May 0:39

Oh, Helga. Thanks for having me.

Such a pleasure to have you here. So Megan, before we talk about the mentoring program and your experience in the boardroom, I, as always just want to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me, what was young Megan, like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom?

Oh, well, I guess it's not something that popped into my mind when I was at school or university or anything like that. But I've always had a bit of a level of learning and always been very driven and goal oriented. I did the public speaking at secondary school, and then went on to university and had five years there before progressing into private practice. And I guess pretty quickly working as an allied health professional in private practice, I realised that as opposed to working in a hospital, there's not sort of a linear career progression or clear pathway mapped out for you. So I realised that I probably have to figure this out myself. And that's what encouraged me to seek out different opportunities. Look for I continued sort of studying and doing some different post grad courses. And pretty much said yes to anything that came my way that I thought would help me to grow and learn as an osteopath, but also as a working as a subcontractor then, so if you're essentially running your own small business, so I was just open minded to all different kinds of opportunities. And in particular, living in regional Victoria fair, living in Ballarat, I think even more. So. Anything that came my way that I could fit in? I thought, I'd definitely say yes to

Helga Svendsen 2:24

Sounds like you're, you've already got that. Good. You know, as that what do they talk about the growth mindset or a learning mindset, learning new things, experiencing new things sounds like it's really embedded in your DNA.

Megan May 2:37

Yeah, and I guess on reflection, not all of them have been 100% applicable or helpful. So I did get a scholarship to study the grad cert and agricultural health and medicine, which was really interesting. But I probably haven't applied that, in a high level to my daily practice, treat a few farmers every now and then. But it was still a great opportunity and something that I didn't want to say no to. So different things have taken different amounts of time and been helpful in different ways.

Helga Svendsen 3:09

Now, you're working in your small business, you're on the board of Ballarat Community Health. And you're Chair of the subcommittee. And as part of that, you did the Victorian Health Care Association mentoring program as a mentee. So can you just tell us a bit about what that is, and how it came about for you to be involved in it.

Megan May 3:31

Yeah, definitely. So an email came through my inbox advertising the mentoring program. And in 2019, I've done a different program, the Joan Kearney young and emerging women leaders program, and had access to some really inspiring women and a mentor through that. And that program had finished obviously wouldn't had sort of COVID last year. And I just thought the time might be right to take up something like this. I guess I had a few goals that I wanted to achieve in 2021, and a few things that I wanted to explore. So I could see that a mentor could be helpful. And my the chair of that community health also kind of forwarded on and that's often happened, I guess, in my career that different people on the board have sort of swung things my way and said, Have you seen this? Have you made sure you've applied? So that probably cemented the idea of applying, and then I was lucky enough to be matched with a great mentor.

Helga Svendsen 4:29

Okay, so the Victorian Health Care Association runs this mentoring program, they just kind of put it out to people to nominate themselves presumably as either a mentee or a mentor. You were matched up with a mentor, but what are the nuts and bolts of how that happened? Like how were you introduced to them? When you first met with your mentor? How did you set the kind of rules of engagement for the mentoring relationship?

Megan May 4:52

Yeah, so they put together a bit of a format which I'm sure they had to adapt because of COVID because they were meant to be in person. events and they had some great sort of forms and quizzes to start with to sort of say, what type of mentor you're looking for, and what kinds of goals do you have. And then once they matched us with someone, we sort of got each other's BIOS. And they also had some templates to help frame your conversations so that you can put down some really clear goals and figure out what you wanted to get out of the mentoring program. Because I imagine if you're a mentor, if you're not really sure what your mentee is aiming to get out of it, then it's hard for you to figure out how best to help them. So they did try and create some structure and some guidelines to give you some resources. And then I guess it was up to us to arrange the times that suited and figure out how often we wanted to chat and what our topics of discussion would be.

Helga Svendsen 5:49

Okay, so what were your goals for the program?

Megan May 5:52

This year, I was hoping to do the AICD course. I was having to get on board to pay for it. Also, knowing that I was approaching my third and final term on that community health, I just thought it was a good opportunity to start speaking to different people and finding out where are my skills? And what other interests do I have? And what might be future opportunities for me. So what are the boards? Should I have a look at or what should be on my horizon to put myself in a good position for whatever might come my way in another three years?

Helga Svendsen 6:26

Okay, which I imagine a pretty common goals for anyone on a board in some ways, like, particularly coming up to a final term. Yeah, what are the skills? Where should I land next? How should I land next in that role? So working with you're actually Who was your mentor?

Megan May 6:45

My mentor was Deb Colville. So she's an ophthalmologist.

Helga Svendsen 6:49

Oh, the wonderful Deb Colville. Shout out to Deb. Deb is amazing. She's been in a couple of my programs. She's fabulous. I didn't realise that great. Anyway. Sorry. Go on.

Megan May 7:01

Lovely person. Also great sense of humor. Yeah, we had a really great time. Oh, she is such a wise woman.

Helga Svendsen 7:08

Okay, so tell me, how did you work with Deb, on your goals? How did you explore your skills? How did you explore what your interests might be? And kind of explore what might be next had? How did that work?

Megan May 7:23

I mean, I think just fundamentally getting to know someone externally, who has no sort of background knowledge of you and having to maybe summarise your experiences or your challenges, pose some questions, show some vulnerability, they're always going to have different insights from the people that sit around the board table or from your family and friends. So already, she was sort of reflecting things back at me and challenging things that I'd said, and asking, Well, why did you say no to this opportunity? Or,

You know, you're telling me you'd like to do this in the future. But when this came your way, you said no to it. Why was that? And it was really interesting, because I guess it just made me reflect on even though I thought I was saying yes to everything, there were still some barriers, I was maybe putting in my own way due to lack of confidence, or just the state I was in my life. You know, there was a point where our chair came to me and said, Would you want to consider putting your name out as deputy chair? And I had maybe a three week old newborn? That almost burst into tears and said, No. And it was really interesting, because to me, that was perfectly logical decision making. And Deb sort of said to me, alright, so what's actually involved in being a deputy? And when we chatted about it, I think quite often, there's not too much involved unless the chairs away. And she said, I think he should have just said, Yes. And then if it was too much, he could have said no, at some point along the way. And that's interesting, isn't it, that maybe I'd sort of leaned out prematurely in anticipation of the challenges that might come and what I thought that burden might be on my family, or how much responsibility or stress it might be. But I'd sort of base that decision making on some assumptions as opposed to any actual evidence. So even just having a fresh perspective, really challenging and questioning what you were doing, compared to what you were saying was really, really helpful.

Helga Svendsen 9:25

How fantastic you are having that mirror held up sometimes is incredibly helpful and a little bit confronting sometimes. Did you end up being deputy chair or had the ship sailed by the time you had that conversation?

Megan May 9:39

Yeah, that ship had sailed, but it did probably help. Obviously, those opportunities come around at different times. And I've had to confirm whether I want to continue to be there, the chair of the committee that I'm on, and it did probably help continuing to say yes to these things and knowing that nothing's locked in stone forever. If you did get to a point where it's not manageable. And then you can always step back if you need. But maybe that's a pathway that you can continue on as opposed to putting these roadblocks in front of yourself in anticipation. And then some of that is probably just lacking confidence and being young and kind of that imposter syndrome of thinking, well, surely there'd be someone else better than me. So yeah, I've had to really reflect on that.

Helga Svendsen 10:24

There's so many little alleyways, I can go down there. But imposter syndrome, I think strikes everybody, no matter how old they are. To some extent, I think it's a little voice in our ear, quite often. But it's interesting in there as well, because I think, whether it's as Deputy Chair of the Board, or whether it's chair of the committee, the other thing is that these roles need to morph around women who have got young children or women who are pregnant, or women who need to breastfeed in the boardroom. You know, if you'd mentioned breastfeeding in the boardroom, 20 years ago, it would probably be an anathema. But now it's thankfully, not seen as something too unusual. Because if you're going to have women involved in governance of organisations, then these are the sorts of things that are going to happen.

Megan May 11:12

Yeah, and obviously, zoom has actually made life a little bit easier in that sense if you are trying to juggle things at home. But yeah, I sort of found like, I guess, my board, were really supportive of anything that I wanted to do. But when you do have a room of people that are a different stage in life to you, they don't necessarily know how to be helpful. And that probably happens for a variety of people in different scenarios. This is just probably one small example. But for example, our chair had decided to take times off the agenda, because he felt that sometimes we might have just been popping arbitrary times next, under items, and it was maybe limiting the quality of discussion and meaning that we might not spend the amount of time on strategic items that we should or too much on smaller items. So wanting things to sort of flow a bit more naturally. And for us to all maybe be a bit more disciplined in what we've spent time discussing. I said, that's fine. But I really need to know, does this meeting go for one hour or three hours? Because I might need to know whether I'm

bringing a baby or not. If I'm pumping, if I'm zooming in if I'm coming in person. And I guess even just that realization of that there's other things going on your life, when potentially everyone else around the board table might be at a really different stage. And it doesn't matter what time of night they get home, you sort of have to raise those things.

Helga Svendsen 12:38

How did you raise that? Because in one way, I can completely understand that the chair wants to have a more organic conversation to see how it goes yet, obviously, that has an impact as well. And a key role of a director is speaking up about things whether it's the time of the board meeting, or I don't know the strategic direction of the organization. So in as much detail as you willing to share? How did you realise that?

Megan May 13:01

Yeah, no, he was great. I just had a conversation. And I said, I say that we don't have any times on the agenda. It makes life a little bit difficult for me, do you have any indication of what you're hoping to achieve in terms of times? And these are the reasons why I needed a bit of a rough guideline. And he said, Yeah, good, good. Okay, we'll take that on board. Easy.

Helga Svendsen 13:22

There you go. If only it were that easy all the time. That is that, but both in terms of raising the issue. And in terms of resolving the issue? Easy, there you go. If only it were that easy all the time, that is fair, but both in terms of raising the issue. And in terms of resolving the issue.

Megan May 13:41

Because I guess if you don't raise it, you're probably just going to get a bit resentful. And when you're on a volunteer board, if you're resenting the amount of time that you're spending or the way it's impacting on on your personal or your family life, it's not really a recipe for success, I don't think

Helga Svendsen 13:56

So, I want to link it back to the mentoring side of things. And, you know, the goals that you had there. We talked about some of the prodding, I guess, that Deb provided for you in terms of some of those opportunities. You talked about, I think, what are the skills that you can bring to the board and exploring that? What are the interests? And then those future opportunities around that skills and interests side of things? What were the conversations you had with your mentor there that helped to shine a light on some of the things that might come up for you?

Megan May 14:30

Yeah, I guess Deb was trying to get out of me what bits do I find really interesting in the board, and if you've got a bit of passion or special interests, then it's always going to make reading those one packs far less cumbersome. And so even in having some of those conversations and realising which parts of the board meeting make your eyes light up or which topics you're really interested in discussing or sharing. Having to retell that to someone else externally. Even That gets you thinking about which bits you really enjoy. And then you can sort of sit back and think about how would you apply that to different boards? And what skills have you gotten? I think also, I wasn't sure, with different levels of boards what the time commitment would be, or I guess, what the skills required would be. So we sort of spoke about different types of boards and just exploring those opportunities. And then the practicalities of what you need on your resume and how they get advertised and what to keep your eyes out for. And the timeframe, because some of them, you know, particularly some of those health boards have a really long time frame for applying versus when you so you might need to be thinking about this quite a while in advance. So just getting a bit of an insight from her. And I haven't necessarily come to any conclusions, but it's been a good process to just explore those options.

Helga Svendsen 15:53

Say, I was going to ask, so what is next for you, but maybe it's all still running around? So your your current term on Ballarat Community Health, you're on your third and final term. When does that term finish?

Megan May 16:06

I'm just approaching that third and final term. So issue I guess, re elected in November at our AGM, then I'll have three years left.

Helga Svendsen 16:16

Right. Okay. So which is a perfect period of time to then be thinking about...

Megan May 16:20

But it was, it was just a great opportunity, I guess, when you've got someone pretty experienced, mentor to ask some of those questions and start to think about what opportunities might be in the future?

Helga Svendsen 16:34

And what about the nuts and bolts of your mentoring? You know, how often did you meet, when who set the agenda, but the nuts and bolts.

Megan May 16:45

Yeah, so we would aim to zoom once a month. And we would always have a few kind of backups, that was something that Deb recommended, which I found really helpful of we would plan our meeting date and time. And then we would always plan a backup meeting date and time in case anything popped up. And generally, I would sort of set the agenda. And so this is what I've got coming up. So during the prorating for the ICD course or I'm trying to figure out how to do this with the committee. And, and then she was often pretty good at summarising our conversation and sending me an email straight afterwards. So often we would be chatting and she would say, Oh, this resource could be helpful, or you should listen to this podcast. Or maybe you should do some networking with these people. And so she was often pretty good at wrapping that up. And I think you've got to do that straightaway. Because we're all busy. I mean, I was running a multidisciplinary allied health clinic and through multiple lockdown this year, she's a really busy person as well. So it was probably important that we showed that respect to each other and were quite disciplined with our time and respectful of when we arranged those meetings, and just making sure that the conversation was productive. I mean, I think as a mentee, you need to come to your mentor with some questions and challenges and something that they can help you with, and then show some vulnerability, and be open to some ideas and feedback. And I guess Deb was big on sort of saying, Well, I'm not really here to tell you the end. I'm here to sort of guide you into some options or ways of thinking or, which is funny when it came to AICD. Time and she said I do have some practice exams I could send you I'm not sure that's really my job. Anyway, we had a laugh about that I got through the course. So that was exactly. And actually got through it a lot easier than I expected. So that's that was probably another thing where she was great at sort of saying, Look, you've been on a board for almost six years now, I think you'll be surprised. But I must admit, I still went into the course thinking our Gosh, I'm sure there'll be people way smarter and more experienced than me, and then got to the five days and realize that actually being on a board for six years does train your brain to think quite strategically. And a lot of it did make sense and just reinforced that, luckily, I'm on a board that's of quite high quality and has some really good processes. So it was actually really positive and encouraging to go through that process.

Helga Svendsen 19:21

I think it's interesting. I often get asked the question, when's the right time to do the AICD course, you know, will it help me get on a board? And I always say, look, yes, it probably will help you to get on a board. But in all honesty, I think you will get more out of it once you're on a board so that you have that practical experience. You already had six years on the board. And I think that practical experience in that strategic thinking and governance way of thinking helps enormously to get more

out of the program. It's not to say you wouldn't get something out of the program if you did it six years ago.

Megan May 19:54

No, I think so. Right. And that's when I did my induction six years ago with the board. Yeah, the Deputy Chair at the time sort of said you could do it now. But I exactly what you said, I think you'll get more out of it if you wait a little bit. And then I just sort of had to make the timing right, because you can't do anything. So. But yeah, there were a lot of executives in the room who were doing it hoping to maybe understand the board a bit better or to further their board opportunities in the future. There are a lot of people that hadn't been on a board. And it was interesting to see the way that people's brains thought differently, or the direction that the conversation went.

Helga Svendsen 20:31

I'm just swinging back to the mentoring program. As I said earlier, the Victorian Health Care Association coordinated this program for mentors and mentees, which is incredible. And for those listening, if you are on a health care board, it might be worth contacting the VHA. And I'll make sure a link to that is in the show notes. But if you're not on a health board, it might be worth contacting your own Industry Association, if there is such a thing to see if they have a mentoring program, or do encourage them to start one if they don't, that for those that may not have access to this sort of program run by someone like the Victorian Health Care Association. What's your advice to people in finding the right mentor and setting up the right mentoring relationship? What's your advice?

Megan May 21:20

It's interesting, because each time I've done a few mentoring programs now through sort of commerce Ballarat, and through the Joan Kirner program, and then now through the VHA. And originally when my first program ended, I remember saying to one of the really wonderful guys on my board. I've just had this great mentoring program that's ended, what do I do now. And I think his advice probably applies. Similarly to someone that hasn't had access to a mentor. He said, Well, now you just need to surround yourself with your own board of directors. And we had this great conversation where, you know, I was running a business that was growing. And I'd had a great mentor that had covered a little bit of all aspects of the different challenges that I was facing. But Robert, and I sort of spoke about how there's probably someone in your circles, who might be a retired accountant who's happy to chat through some of your finance questions, there might be someone who you can connect with remotely or through someone that you know, who might be able to help problem solve some of the issues that you might have. And I just, I think that's a great way of thinking about it. Because unless you're in a formalised mentoring program, I mean, some people might be really open to just taking you on as a mentee. But it's an it is a commitment, and it's a bit of a big ask of someone. Whereas if you're saying, I think you've got some really interesting experience or skills in this area, and this is a challenge that I have with my day job or time as a

director or whatever it might be, can we have a coffee every now and then and chat about how I could do this a little bit better, or some challenges that I'm facing here. It's amazing how many people are actually really generous with their time and knowledge, especially some of the directors that I've met that have maybe semi retired or retired and have so much like wealth, some healthy, huge, that they're really happy to share. So I've kind of probably been a bit brazen, I guess every now and then in in when I've come across someone who I think well, you are really inspiring and, and a wealth of knowledge. Just kind of asking, could we have a coffee? Or do you mind if I gave you a call sometime to ask about this particular challenge not solve all my life problems? And people have been really wonderful.

Helga Svendsen 23:32

Oh, my God, that is fantastic. I love a brazen ask, partly because I think you're right. Often people will say yes. And if they don't want to say yes, people will also say no. So as long as you leave the opportunity for them to say no, I think that's fantastic. Good on you. And I love that concept.

Megan May 23:51

Yeah, sometimes then it leads to another door, because they might say, Oh, actually, that's not really my field of finance, or, but I know someone else who would be really great for you to chat to and then you've kind of met somebody else. You've, I guess, essentially done some networking, but it means you've got your own little sort of board of directors that you can go to for different topics or challenges that might pop up. Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 24:15

Oh, great advice in there. Oh, Megan, as always, the time has gone super quickly. And there's some fabulous tips in there. So I'm wondering what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Megan May 24:32

Look, I think mentoring is a really great opportunity. So if there's something coming into your inbox and you're wondering, should I have a go or not, then I'm taking my own advice and saying there's no harm having you go and putting yourself forward because you never know who might meet and the opportunities that might come out of it. If you don't have access to a structured mentoring program, then there's probably no reason why you can't essentially create your own or think of where you have some gaps or way you need some extra knowledge. But if you're going to do something like that, you have to have the ability to reflect on maybe your weaknesses or your areas of growth and show a bit of vulnerability. Because if you're going to go to someone asking for some advice and help, they need to have a way to help you, you have to give them an in. And I have only

been on the mentee side of the fence so far, but in an official capacity. But I imagine it's not really enjoyable if someone's not showing any vulnerability or has no ability to reflect on some of the things that they could have done, done differently. So yeah, I think you have to be really open minded when you go into any of these programs.

Helga Svendsen 25:42

Absolutely. And I think that's to some extent from both sides, I always like to think of it as almost a mentoring partnership, because I think the mentor also learns an enormous amount from the from their partnership as well. So can you recommend resorts for the take onboard community?

Megan May 26:00

Well, it's interesting, because I was talking to a friend about that decision with the cheering. And we were reflecting on the Sheryl Sandberg book, Lean In, which I always thought I did a lot of leaning in until I had a baby. And maybe didn't reflect on how it doesn't just stop there. You can keep leaning in beyond that in different ways, and depending on what else is going on in your life. But that concept of not leaning out prematurely, because of your own mental roadblocks or hurdles is probably really good advice. And then the other book, I guess that has helped me along the way of growing a business and having more staff and working as a director is a book called Radical Candor by Kim Scott. I think probably for me, that helps summarise, essentially, it's a lot about how to give feedback and how to be respectful and kind and your feedback, and that you're doing a disservice if you don't actually give any honest feedback. And I think often for women, that can be an issue when you send an email that's full of so many qualifiers, and pleases and thank yous and exclamation marks that no one actually knows what you're saying and what you want. And then you wonder why nothing happened. But it also helped to guide me in I think, a key to being a good board director is how to ask good questions. And probably a few years ago, there would have been times where my sort of immaturity and lack of experience would lead to my questioning being just not as helpful as it could have been, I think that concept of maybe they talk about caring personally. So you've got to build those relationships first, and come from a place of empathy. And I think that sort of leads you to asking more careful and respectful questions, rather than maybe sometimes going down a rabbit hole of a questioning line that might either Have you really, in the weeds as a board member, when you should be staying strategic, or prompting defensive answers from executive, when that's not necessarily the angle you're trying to get at. So that's a really kind of key skill that I'm in I'm always trying to develop. But I think that that book kind of helped frame that, in a way that sense made sense for my brain.

Helga Svendsen 28:35

Yeah. Likewise, I read it earlier this year, I think, and I think it's got some great frameworks in there. It's Yeah, it's a fabulous one. Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining us here today. And indeed, thank you, because I imagine you've got an enormous man on I really appreciate it. And I

know that others will get an enormous amount out of our conversation today. So thank you for sharing with the take onboard community today. No worries. Thanks for having me.