



Take on Board

Transcript – Sandie de Wolf

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Last week on the Take on Board Podcast you heard from Megan May about her experience in being a mentee. So today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Sandy de Wolf about being a mentor in the same program. We'll also touch on the board relationship with the CEO and reporting to boards. First, let me tell you about Sandie. Sandie chairs the eastern domestic violence service and the western integrated Family Violence Committee, and she is also on the board of Kilfinan, and Deputy Chair of the Victorian children's Council. She has previously been on the boards of Families Australia, Great Connections, the Centre for Excellence family planning, Victoria centre and a range of others. Sandie has spent her professional career working with others to prevent violence to women and children and to help them recover. She started as a social worker in Broadmeadows with what is now that department of families Fairness and Housing Victoria. She has worked in the community sector since 1989. And her most significant leadership role was as the CEO of berry straight, which she did for 26 years. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast Sandie.

Sandie de Wolf 1:05

Thanks, Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:07

Before we begin our discussion today, as always, I would like to dig just a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Sandie that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Sandie de Wolf 1:19

Compared with lots of other people here, I think it's quite a boring story. So I had a very stable childhood really went to the same school from the time I was four until I finished school. And I guess my parents that were big influences on my life, as they mostly are for everybody, but positive and very positive. For me, my mum was the honorary secretary of traveller's aid, which is a volunteer organisation and helps travellers for 35 years. And mum and dad were very, just very community minded. So Meals on Wheels and all sorts of other things. I think the other thing is that I was always encouraged to believe I could do whatever I wanted, you know, whatever I wanted, and, and I could take every opportunity that was that came my way. So I was aware of the time that it was a privileged upbringing, not wealthy, I don't mean wealthy, but privileged in the sense of opportunity.

But I probably didn't realise as much as I do now, just what their privilege meant, and the confidence that gave me I guess, to do other things in life.

Helga Svendsen 2:20

So did you go straight into social work?

Sandie de Wolf 2:22

Then, when I left school, I had no idea what I wanted to do. And again, like, unlike some people who have such a clear sort of plan about their life, I've never had any plans till don't really. So I went in, I did all those answered Monash University, and then thought, Oh, my goodness, what am I going to do, took a year off, and then really fell into social work. And I got a cadetship with the Department of Community welfare as it was then. And that means that I was bonded for two years with a department. That's where I started in Broadmeadows. And I'm just so fortunate that I've ended up in, you know, a career and profession that I just love. And it's been wonderful to work with, particularly the people I've worked with, because we choose to people to to work in the community sector aren't motivated by money, yes, they need to be paid properly, but you know, their motivation is to give back. And I've had the privilege of working in that sector now for my whole life, really, and it's still in lots of different ways too.

Helga Svendsen 3:22

It is really wonderful when people love what they do.

Sandie de Wolf 3:25

It is a privilege I think, you know, I think it's I remember saying to people that very strict when I was there 26 years, which is an incredibly long time. It wasn't the same organisation's when I started otherwise, you know, you could be people would think, Oh, my God, what was she doing? In my role at Berry Street I was intellectually emotionally and ethically challenged every day, and was always learning from people around me and from clients with whom we would

Helga Svendsen 3:51

How fabulous. In fact, I only saw earlier I think on something that you'd sent through to me that when you started with Berry Street it was after an amalgamation with Sutherland homes as well. I grew up in Diamond Creek, which is where Southern Homes were. So as soon as I read that, I remembered that and the kids that came to our school that were from Southern homes, and, and so on, so I hadn't realised..

Sandie de Wolf 4:14

That's why I started as the CEO in July 1991. And we were quite well known in the community, as you're saying, but certainly not any broader than that. And we were not financially sustainable. And we really needed to find a partner. So I was terrific coming together with various trades. So I was fortunate enough to be appointed as the CEO.

Helga Svendsen 4:39

We can hear from that, you know, incredibly rich history that there's going to be lots of fun little lessons you're going to share with us over the next half hour or so, I hope. So, let's start with the mentoring. You have been a mentor for the VHA the Victorian Health Care Association mentoring program. Let's just start how you got involved with that program?

Sandie de Wolf 5:02

So I was asked, and so what I normally do when I'm asked to do things, I usually say yes, but I, I'm very, I would say always been very conscious of the informal mentor environment by throughout my career to countless staff and colleagues and, and since I've finished full time work, I have been a mentor with Kilfinan. And also with a women's development women's leadership program that was run through Leadership Victoria. And with VHA, I thought, you know, if I can contribute something, then that's good. So happy to do it.

Helga Svendsen 5:38

In as much detail as you're able to share, because sometimes things that are discussed in the mentoring relationship can't be shared. But tell us about the mentoring relationship, maybe some of the challenges that are shared with you, and just how it works.

Sandie de Wolf 5:51

So I'm very fortunate, particularly with the mentee through the VHA program, he was an experienced board chair. And when we started talking, I was thinking, are you sure you need to be in this program? Maybe we should reverse roles, because he knew a lot already so. So with him, it was really a matter of probably having a person outside his organisation's that he could sort of bounce ideas off, check his thinking, you know, was he missing out on some some things, were there other things he could be doing? It was really an exchange of ideas as much as you know, me being the mentor him being mentee. So one of the critical things about mentoring is that the mentees are well prepared. So he would always send me a week before, these are the issues I want to talk about this week. And next week, and that would give me an opportunity to think about it. But also if I had some

resources that I could send his way, which I did a number of times, I shared some of the board documents on some on the from the inverse, where the organisation where I'd share with their permission, of course, and you know, other resources that I could find for him with another mentoring relationship with a woman through the leadership program being run by the government. This was she was looking for first board position. And she was a CFO, and working in an organisation that she wasn't really very happy in and also was not happy about some of the ethical issues that she was being confronted with. So I really, I think I helped her a lot more than I helped the mentee through the program, because she would do really, really need to work out, you know, how does she get the sort of role that she wants to? Where did Where does she want to move to and in terms of boards for opportunities would there be for her there. So she ended up resigning and getting really good job in actually in the family violence sector. And we keep in touch. And now it's been it's been very good, she's started getting onto some boards too. So I think she would say it was incredibly useful, I would hope that Paul, who's the person that I mentor through VHA, would say it was helpful, too, but not to the same degree, because he had lots of experience. He knew what he was doing and was more a sounding board and checking point for him.

Helga Svendsen 8:20

So he was the CEO of the organisation, right? As a chair, he was the chair, right? Yeah. And being the chair. Likewise, though, it can be a really lonely position to be in because you can't always share all of the challenges with your board. I mean, you can broadly but you can't always share them with the CEO that you're working with. So I imagine having that safe space where you can just toss things around, because there's not many people you can do that with?

Sandie de Wolf 8:45

No, I think that that's right. And he and he certainly did value that I'd had a change of CEO and they've been some issues with the previous CEO and new CEO was a lot better, but still wasn't using the board in the way that he thought he could. So we're sort of having a tweak there. What sort of conversations do you have? We talked about what other conversation might have with every couple of board members who, you know, maybe needed to move on. And I mean, he knew what the issues were and he knew the best way probably about going back, you know, fixing them was just really somebody to say yeah, that's what I would have done or that sounds sensible to me or perhaps have you have you thought about tweaking this part of it. He was a very competent person.

Helga Svendsen 9:28

Fabulous, what do you get out of the mentoring relationship?

Sandie de Wolf 9:32

Well, you don't go into it for what you're gonna get out of it. But. I always learned so one of the things that I've enjoyed and still do about my life is being curious and curious about people about issues about how people do things, and so I always learn from every experience I have talking in the mentoring relationship. I learned until then, A couple of things were Paul had done something. And I thought, Oh, yes, I forgot. And so I said, look, I think we might find it.

Helga Svendsen 10:06

Fantastic. So you've talked about the mentee, needing to be prepared to make it successful. What are your tips for success for setting up that relationship?

Sandie de Wolf 10:17

One of the things that I've always done is had an agreement, an agreement in writing, but not that it sort of holds us to, you know, anything in particular, except that it's it says, this is what I expect. And then both of us say, this is what I expect. And this is what, you know, the mentees hoping to get out of the relationship. And then I can say, this is what I'm going to bring, and reviewing that at periodically, whatever sort of time period you think is useful. And if it's not helpful, or if it doesn't feel right, then I would encourage people to say, thank you very much. But this isn't right. But don't give up on the opportunity to perhaps find somebody else.

Helga Svendsen 11:01

They are fabulous tips for mentoring for mentors and mentees. So I'm sure that's going to be really valuable for people. But I want to change tack a little bit, I guess, because you've been both a CEO and a board chair, you know, for a significant part of your career, you've got insights into the relationship between the CEO of an organisation and the chair of an organisation. So what's your advice for chairs and CEOs, in ensuring that the relationship, you know, remains strong and constructive and robust?

Sandie de Wolf 11:35

One of the things that's become really obvious is just how dependent boards are or I mean, it sounds obvious. But in terms of the information that they provide to the board, and I have had lots of conversations with other CEOs about they're not how many chairs, actually, but they're reporting to the board what to do, what do they tell their board and what sort of format and it's, you know, building that sense of trust that you as a CEO can be honest about what the issues are, and know that when you raise the worries as well as the good things that you know, they won't be slamming down or, you know, that people will listen and look and look at how they can be supportive, rather

than look to blame is absolutely fundamental. So I had seven presidents while I was at Berry Street, and I ended up with being white. Now, I'm friends with 6 out of 7. The other one is not for any reason, except that I just don't see him. But I worked, I worked my relationships with my chairs, hard. So I will, whenever I got a new chair, I would spend quite a bit of time trying to get to know them, giving them as much opportunity as they wanted or needed to ask about the organisation, spend time in the organisation be as open as I could. They want to do to meet with other staff. And so really building and then talking to them about what is it that's important to them, and particularly around formal reporting, but obviously also informal reporting. So you know, what is it that they like to see board reports? And what is it that they would expect if you know, when you'd have a phone call, or when you know, when you would email the whole board, so really listening to them, and trying to work out how to, you know, meet their needs in the most productive way for the organization. And as the board chair, I've sort of done there to begin reverse, again, working, you know, being involved, usually, but not always in selecting the CEO. So you're starting off that relationship with a sense, I hope of, of honesty, integrity, mutual trust, and being very clear about what you think the issues are, when they're appointed. And then understanding that that might change once they get in on the job that, you know, it's certainly being very upfront and not hiding anything, particularly the big issues, not hiding anything when you're appointing someone. So you're starting from a position of trust. And then meeting with them, depends what's happening. So when you've got some things happening, you know, problems. I will be meeting formally once a week. And phone calls in between and if you're under normal circumstances, you know, probably fortnightly or monthly depending again, in depending on what's happening in the organisation. And the state real evolving, so and being very clear with the CEO about understanding the board's role is about strategy and governance and we won't interfere with operational issues, but we need to know if there are things that are bothering you. So that yeah, that's the sort of thing.

Helga Svendsen 14:56

I mean, it's a relationship like anything else, I guess, isn't it? So you Berry Street for a while, I guess. But it must have been a little bit exhausting having seven different presidents over that time, because I'm guessing each time it to some extent rewrote the rules of the way things worked.

Sandie de Wolf 15:11

Well, it was stimulating to because there were people I knew them all. So they'd all been on the board for a while, and most of them stayed on the ball when they left. So I think it's quite stimulating, because I wasn't losing the people who had been the president. Yeah, they were staying on board. But I had an opportunity to work more closely with the with the new president, and they were all such terrific people. And I learned so much from all of them. That No, it was more stimulating.

Helga Svendsen 15:40

Now, you talked about dealing with problems before and how that might impact the relationship between the CEO and the chair just in how often they meet and so on. Now, I understand you've been through a bit of a crisis at the border, I'm not sure if it was when you were CEO, or when you're on the board, were both in Melbourne. And the front page of the Herald Sun test is something that is often talked about in boards, for those that are not from Melbourne, the Herald Sun is, you know, the tabloid paper in Melbourne, and it is often used as the risk test, or will it end up on the front page of the Herald Sun, you've been on the front page of the Herald Sun for what I'm guessing is all the wrong reasons. So I'm wondering if you can tell us what happened, and how the board worked with that crisis?

Sandie de Wolf 16:24

Sure. It was in January on January the 19th 2001. I know the date from indelibly impressed in my memory, because we're about to celebrate 125th year, we were just planning the year and then seven o'clock in the morning, we're in the front page of the Herald Sun, I was the CEO. So it was about an issue called chroming, which is when kids use bags with glue or something and they inhale a substance, it's an awful thing to do. It's a quite a long story, but I'll keep it quite short. So if there is we looked after kids who had couldn't be at home and suffered a lot of violence and abuse and often turn to substances to help them sort of deal with the trauma that they had. And then substances by that I mean alcohol and cigarettes and things as well. So so we decided a couple of years before this, that we develop a substance use policy, which was from cigarettes to legal drugs to illegal drugs. And there wasn't any the government in harmony. So we set up an expert advisory group, and we did a discussion paper, which we had talked about at the board. And one of the issues that was particularly relevant for us was if we say, if you write down a policy, then you need to be able to implement it, and you will be held to them. But if you don't write it down, and then you're leaving it to the discretion of residential care workers, and you do whatever they thought was best, and we didn't think that was fair. So the board was very clear that we needed to have an organizational position, and we need to be able to understand that. So we did a discussion paper we wrote, then we write the policy, we are actually given a best practice front by the Minister at the time to make it available to the rest of the sector, because it was very well researched, was easy to follow. It was it was a terrific piece of work, which as it turns out was incredibly fortunate. Because in June, the year before we had put a submission into a parliamentary inquiry into I think it was just cramming actually. And we we were then reported, the report came out in about August, that we thought that this approach that we took, which was you don't turn the kids away, basically, you keep them in the house, you give them water, you watch them, you make sure they're okay. Because they've been several instances not with us, or where kids have just run out on roads and run on the train tracks, it was incredibly dangerous. So was that it was the sensible, you know, minimizing sort of approach. And so we've been given a best practice grant, we've talked about it on the radio, and then six months later, out of the blue, we're on the front page of the Herald Sun with a headline something like very straight rounds, safe chroming rooms or was was picking up on the safe injecting stuff it was time. So couple of things that are really stand out for me about that was one the board was absolutely committed to this policy. They've been involved for 18 months, they understood it, they

can lay the chair was very well connected. I mean, we knew that but very well connected. And organised. The catalyst was a Monday and by the Wednesday, we had not been placed in the Herald Sun and we met, we met with the editor of their Herald Sun and she could sort of cue into some places. Thirdly, we had an absolute brilliant woman who was an expert in crisis management. And she moved in within three hours with a with an AI and we had a war room set up in the boardroom. And and we put out in those days, it wasn't emails much per 10,000 pieces of communication in a couple of days. And I did 22 interviews on that first day and Mary was managing all that. So we had two people who were very good at their job. And the other thing that was absolutely vital was communication. So because you can imagine what it was like internally, the staff were just traumatised because the government said we have to stop doing it. And that was really tricky. But the thing that was that was most significant and why I think in the end, as an organisation, we've benefited, it was a positive for us, the board, we came for me to have, do more media that happened, I wouldn't take that off on the first month. But it gave us exposure to, we had about 200, people sort of contact us all of whom were positive except one except for seven. And it led to an approach from our philanthropic trust to say we really like your work. And that led to the establishment of our first various trade school and government changed their policy. And the Herald Sun actually changed their stance on chroming over time, too. So it was a incredibly challenging time to work through, probably for two weeks initially, but then, and then there was a lot of mapping up to do. But it was a very, it was a positive. And it was because the board was totally behind the policy, they had lots of opportunity to understand that asked questions, they knew we've got the best advice in developing it was a very interesting couple of weeks.

Helga Svendsen 21:23

And it's interesting, because like I said, at the, at the outset of this often that, you know, the front page of the Herald Sun test is what people use in assessing risk. You ended up on the front page of the Herald Sun, but I think what I'm hearing there is even if you'd known that that was going to be a risk, you wouldn't have done things differently.

Sandie de Wolf 21:40

No, we wouldn't have because we knew it was a risk, which is why we got the expert advice. While we're taking the time why we got on board on board while we got staff on board. Yes, we have the other thing I forgot we trained all our staff. And so the government wants us to do so we had trained all our staff in the policy. Yeah, we wouldn't have done anything differently. Then you ride on the quota that held some tests, many times. The alternative was not meeting our duty of care to these young people. And secondly, putting staff in an impossible position where they use their own judgment, which and if something went wrong, you know, there was nothing to back them up. And that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair.

Helga Svendsen 22:23

Again, in governance terms, it's a beautiful example around the lowest risk option is often not the best option. You know, yes, there was risk. I mean, there was a risk around not doing it as well obviously risk for the kids at risk for the staff risk for in all sorts of other ways. But to do the right thing involves risk. It involves, as you'd say before ethical questions and when to when to just step forward and do the right thing. It sounds like that's what the organisation did, and the board backed it, which is just what you need in a crisis.

Sandie de Wolf 22:52

It was terrific. And we were a bit lucky that we happen to have what I like to say was our good management that we happen to have the right skills on the board. It wasn't just luck. But now if it had been two years before Mary might have been there, engineering would have been the chair, we still would have been fine. But we haven't been able to manage quite as well, as quickly.

Helga Svendsen 23:13

Oh, well, well down on having the right skills in the boardroom and on meeting your media interviews, KPIs within the first three weeks of the year. Very impressive. Oh, look, we have covered so many wonderful things here, you know, both about mentoring and mentoring the board chair and see our relationship and of course, crisis management. Right at the end? What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Sandie de Wolf 23:42

I think one of the things that I worry a bit about is, with the emphasis increasing emphasis on risk, which I totally understand that boards can focus too much on there, and perhaps not understand the business well enough. So one of the things that I want always try to do with my boards when and when asked the CEO but also as chair is to have that balance between your financial inequality and your risk sort of compliance issues. But also give the board as many opportunities as possible to understand the business. So one of the things that we always do is, I've always done is have guests come to the board. So key stakeholders, people who want to develop relationships with sometimes they're people who might challenge the board in thinking things different ways. So really providing opportunities for the board to get a much deeper and broader understanding of the business of the organisation, the context within which the organisation works, because I think that's usually that's the reason people join boards because then to the you know, the purpose of the organisation but I think sometimes the emphasis on compliance and risk can mean that you have board members who really don't understand the business sufficiently to be able to give the sort of advice that is most useful.

Helga Svendsen 25:14

Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Sandie de Wolf 25:18

So this is an old article, but one that I turned to a number of times, and I still think it has relevance today. It's not specifically about boards. It's about creating high impact not for nonprofits. Heather McLeod grant and Leslie Crutchfield, Stanford Social Innovation review in Fall 2007. And I think it just distills very simply sort of six key elements about what makes a really impactful, not for profit. We've, we used it a couple of times with boards at various trade. I haven't used it on my current boards, actually. But I think it's just worth a quick look.

Helga Svendsen 25:57

Fantastic. I'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes when we put this episode out. Fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing your stories and your wisdom and your tips with the Take on Board community today. I know people get a huge amount out of it. So thank you for being here.

Sandie de Wolf 26:15

Thank you. Hello, and thank you for your commitment to improving the way that we can all work together.