



Take on Board

Transcript – Amanda Robinson

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Amanda Robinson about being a co CEO. You'll remember that a few weeks ago I did a podcast about co chairing a board. Well, that prompted the fabulous Dominic Hes to introduce me to Amanda. And here we are. So we'll talk about being a co CEO, maybe what the board should think about in having a co CEO. And we might also touch on boardroom dynamics and boardroom stability. First, let me tell you about Amanda. Amanda is the co CEO at Marshall Day Acoustics and looks after the Australian operations, which includes China and Hong Kong. She is a qualified mechanical engineer who has worked in the acoustics field for over 20 years. She has a passion for delivering high quality acoustic spaces in the built form, and for educating people in acoustics. Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast, Amanda.

Amanda Robinson 0:52

Thanks. Helga, lovely to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:54

So Amanda, before we dig a little bit deeper about being a co CEO, and some of those other boardroom dynamics questions. Firstly, how did you end up where you are today?

Amanda Robinson 1:07

It's an interesting story. So the founder of Marshall Day was stepping back to retirement and we were looking at a new leadership structure. We tried a group of five for a while that absolutely didn't work. And then they sort of pushed a couple of us forward. And I said, I don't really want to do it. They said, Come on. And the other person, my co CEO said, Yeah, I'll take it on. It's a big role to take on. And I felt it was a big responsibility. And I said, Well, how about I, you know, come in and help out for the first couple of years? And five years later, I'm still there. We've made it work.

Helga Svendsen 1:49

Oh, that is interesting. I mean, it's about the topic as well. But that is interesting. So he puts his hand up, like we hear all the time, you know, that sometimes there's a bit of a gender divide, and people who put their hand up for things and he's like, yep, I'll give it a crack. And you're like, Okay, maybe I'll

help out there. I'm sure we'll dig into it a bit more. What was it that prompted you to, to get over the, I don't want to do this? Actually, maybe I will?

Amanda Robinson 2:13

So I guess I had come from a position where I'd stepped off the board. So I had a fair understanding of the role. And what would go on, which was one of the things that scared me about. And it is a lot of responsibility to take on. And I didn't feel that, you know, one person could do that on their own, particularly, you know, he hadn't stepped on the board at that stage. So didn't necessarily have that background.

Helga Svendsen 2:40

Right. Okay. So it's a bit of a win win in that regard for both of you, you get to share that responsibility with somebody else, because you know, what, the wall of work that's coming down the line and responsibility that's coming down the line that's involved in it, and he gets to draw on your experience in that as well.

Amanda Robinson 2:58

Yeah, and we are very different people, we have a completely different dynamic. And I think that's what works best about it. And so very much Yin and Yang, were wrong, he is probably weaker, and where I am weak is strong. And that's why it works.

Helga Svendsen 3:16

Right. So he's already put his hand up saying, although it. How did you approach him and say, actually, you know what, I think you need me, you might not have said it quite that like that. But how did you approach the conversation with him saying, let's do it together?

Amanda Robinson 3:29

So I'm not sure that he put his hand up. It was more that we were both tapped on the shoulder. Yes. He said, Okay, I'll do it. And I said, No, I don't want to get in.

Helga Svendsen 3:42

And we you both tapped on the shoulder to do it together? Yes. Oh, interesting. Okay, so the board said, we want to have co CEOs.

Amanda Robinson 3:51

It wasn't the board. So it came from the founding partner who was you know, looking to retire. He was the one who is really the architect behind it.

Helga Svendsen 4:04

The architect, you know, so many ways. Okay. So you're both tapped on the shoulder, you're not interested. He's he says he is and then you're like, oh, okay, maybe if we're both going to do this together, then it will work in a better way. So, you know, you've touched a little bit already about the yin and the yang, what makes it successful for the two of you?

Amanda Robinson 4:24

I think we are given the circumstances that we've had in the last, you know, 12 to 24 months, that was really the challenge that set us up. And it's all about communication. That's how it works. So I call him my work wife. Every day, during COVID it was morning and night trying to navigate our way through, you know, what was a very difficult situation. And it is about that communication pace. It doesn't work if if one person goes to ground As the whole thing starts to fall over, but it's great to have somebody to also bounce ideas off. I think I tend to drive things a little bit harder. But it's, it's good to have him there to listen support. So what about this? What about that?

Helga Svendsen 5:17

I'm guessing if there's a bit of yin and yang, there's things about each other, that also drive you a little bit nuts? How do you manage to keep that in that kind of constructive zone rather than destructive?

Amanda Robinson 5:28

That's interesting. Um, it is difficult. And sometimes you just have to take a step back and say, okay, you know, it's not necessarily the approach that I would take. But I, one of the key things about our role is listening, you know, you've got to take on board, that criticism, or the acknowledgement, whatever piece it is, and bring that to the table. So probably 70 80% of my job is just listening to people to work the way forward. And that goes to him as well.

Helga Svendsen 6:05

How does the communication work with the board? Because often the CEO is the key conduit between the organisation and the board, you know, the chair might meet with the CEO, how does it work having to have you how does how does that relationship work in practice?

Amanda Robinson 6:18

So up until a few months ago, Christophe was on the board as well, we've made a conscious effort to both of us be off the board, because it was like you were wearing two hats, you driving decisions. And on the other hand, you're, you know, enforcing those decisions, and sometimes the two don't work. So we're now both off the board. And that's a conscious decision. In terms of the communication, we try and divide it between us, but we will normally both sit in on part of the board meeting to communicate. So he tends to look after the financial side of things, and I look after the the operation side of things.

Helga Svendsen 6:59

So you're not both there for the whole board meeting, you actually just come in and out for the bits that you're needed for.

Amanda Robinson 7:05

Sometimes we will both sit in sorry, it depends on what the agenda is for the board meeting. But it doesn't require both of us. Although it's a sticky situation, then normally, the person who's not in will get called in pretty quickly.

Helga Svendsen 7:24

So you were previously on the board? If I've got it, right, you were on the board, you stepped down from the board and then became co CEO, he was on the board and remained on the board for a period of time whilst co CEO, how did you manage the dynamics around all of that, firstly, around stepping down from the board, because you were previously a board member, and you now report to the board. And then for a period of time, you're the other half of you was on the board? How did the dynamics work around that all of those difference?

Amanda Robinson 7:56

We have a pretty unique structure in that the National Day is owned by the employees. And the board is made up of two people in New Zealand, two people in Australia with a coin chair. So it's a

common board across both sides. So anybody who's a shareholder is eligible to put their hand up to go on the board. And we have a rotation policy.

Helga Svendsen 8:22

Oh, now we've got a whole new little rabbit warren to go down. This is fun. Okay, so before we go down the rotation policy, so everybody who is an employee has shares in the business? So, again, how does that work in practice? Is everybody offered the opportunity? Does everybody have the equal amount of shares? How does that work?

Amanda Robinson 8:45

You can put your hand up to be a shareholder. But really, you are also invited to be a shareholder. So you get to a point in your career where valued team member, you know, critical player. So there's there are certain guidelines that we use for selecting shareholders.

Helga Svendsen 9:03

So it's Yep. So once you've been there for a while, presumably you're invited, invited in as shareholders. So just out of interest, what proportion of the staff or shareholders?

Amanda Robinson 9:14

We have 31? I think so. It is nominally 30%.

Helga Svendsen 9:21

Okay, interesting. Okay, so you've got about 30% of your staff over the shareholders. From that comes the board. And you mentioned in there that there's a rotation policy, how do people get on the board, how does that move around? Tell us about that.

Amanda Robinson 9:39

Go to get on the board. So normally, people do a four year term. And then at the end of that they can either put their hand up to re stand or step down, but we try not to have people do more than two terms. Just to keep it fresh and so that you don't have a board that get fixed in their ways. We've got new blood, and it's being driven by the shareholders. Having said that, you know, a four year term, it kind of takes you two to three years to get your feet under the table. So by the time you you get up to speed, then you're potentially stepping off.

Helga Svendsen 10:20

Did you say a four year maximum or an eight year maximum?

Amanda Robinson 10:23

For four and four? Right. But you could also step off after that first Chairman not reached end?

Helga Svendsen 10:31

Yeah, right. Okay. And most people stay on for two terms, or they stay on for one term, or is it a real mix?

Amanda Robinson 10:38

It's a real mix.

Helga Svendsen 10:39

I always think it's an interesting one. Yeah, the length for board members. I mean, I'm definitely a fan of maximum terms, I think it's good to have people moving on after say, eight years, anywhere between kind of eight to 10 years, I think is a good thing. But you're right, four years, if you've got people moving every four years, that could equally be problematic, and actually sway the kind of power in a way towards the CEOs, which might be useful giving you're one of them. But it kind of sways the information knowledge towards the CEO rather than towards the board.

Amanda Robinson 11:12

It is that corporate knowledge that's really important. And you know, a lot of the decisions that go before aren't necessarily known by the current board, you know, how did we get to this point? And so you have to sort of go back and re educate people. Yes, on those topics. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 11:33

How does that also work? When you've got, you know, you're the CEO of the organisation, people report either through to you or to your colleague, or to other allies in the business, and they're on the board? How does that work in a practical sense, in terms of the reporting up through the structure as well?

Amanda Robinson 11:51

I think because we have a common chair, he tends to be the conduit, if you like for those decisions and information. The company is aligned in its goals in delivering acoustic Excellent, so we're all working towards the same thing, we might go a slightly different way.

Helga Svendsen 12:11

Is there any independent directors on the board? Or are they all the shareholders? Who are the employees of the organisation?

Amanda Robinson 12:18

So the non executive, the chair effectively? independent? So he's, he's like the umpire in the room?

Helga Svendsen 12:28

That must be fun. How long has that person been in their place? And how did you find them?

Amanda Robinson 12:32

We have a person who did the role for 15 years, who is fantastic. And he stepped off, I think, three years ago, and the new chair came in, and we went through quite a rigorous process. You know, we knew what we were looking for. We did a series of interviews, we looked in both Australia and New Zealand, and ended up with two men who've been right. But he brings a very different light to the board, from the previous chair.

Helga Svendsen 13:08

Interesting. That's why turnover sometimes on boards is useful, can mess with the equilibrium a little bit. But it's always the fingers crossed, that it's messing with it in a constructive way and taking things forward.

Amanda Robinson 13:21

I think we've got very comfortable, and probably not what you want the board to do, they shouldn't be asking the difficult questions. Yes. Not quite often until soon stop asking difficult questions. That is wrong. I got on the team. Yes.

Helga Svendsen 13:40

Well, then then back to the board role in this co CEO arrangement. I think if I heard rightly, it was the founding director that tapped you both on the shoulder to take it on? How did the board respond to that? What did the board need to know? You know, were they just like, co CEOs? Of course, this is perfect. Let's just do it. Or was there questions around that? How did that work from it becoming an idea and a tap on the shoulder to actually happening?

Amanda Robinson 14:07

I think at the time, so that was when the previous chair was still involved. And he obviously knew the players that were coming to the table. And I think everybody agreed that it was, you know, a good approach. And let's try it. Let's see how it works. You know, we had a review done last year by an external person as well who, you know, made comment that it is a very unusual arrangement, but in this instance, it does work. So if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Helga Svendsen 14:37

So the review, was that about the organisation or was it just about the CO CEOs and how they work together? No, it was about the organisation. And tell me for the CO CEOs, part of that, what were the sorts of things they were evaluating and what were the insights that you got from that that might be a value from others that are listening that thinking about putting this in place?

Amanda Robinson 14:58

It's been it's probably been per month since we went through the review, so it wasn't necessarily analyzing the co CEO role. That was a part of it, it was more about operating model and strategy. That side of things in giving us a steer on how to move things forward. But one of the things that did come out of that is that, where, because we come from an engineering background, we're not necessarily, you know, trained as managers, or CEOs, or in this role, one of the strong suggestions was that we, you know, reached out to coaches to get some support, which has been really useful.

Helga Svendsen 15:44

Fantastic, and management level within the organisation, or is it at the CEO level?

Amanda Robinson 15:49

No, it's at the CEO level.

Helga Svendsen 15:51

Interesting. So tell me in as much detail as you're able, how have you found that working with a coach? And do you both work with the same coach?

Amanda Robinson 16:01

Very interestingly, we say, Christophe has got a coach, I chose not to go down that path, because I have a very strong support network of women that I bounce things off. So I think you mentioned the other week that you went on a walking meeting that regularly with a couple of females who, you know, hold similar roles in similar companies. And I find that far more useful than having somebody external, if you like, come in and told me what for more about, you know, having that ability to bounce ideas off someone and say, you know, what do you think about this situation? What do you think about that situation.

Helga Svendsen 16:46

So for a board, in thinking about bringing in co CEOs, if they are either thinking about proactively going out, and either tapping people on the shoulder or just advertising for a role as co CEOs, or encouraging it as co CEOs, or if they're approached by candidates for a role as co CEOs, I've been on a board before, where we advertise for the CEO. And we had all these individuals, and then a pair of people applied as jobs here, essentially. So what's your advice to boards in what they need to think about in either accepting that or encouraging that amongst others?

Amanda Robinson 17:28

I mean, I'm all for the CO CEO role. I think it works really well. I think what what I would like to see happen more is acknowledgement from the board. I mean, we're very unusual that we don't have any set KPIs or, you know, deliverables or, you know, we've got reporting, but that's about it. And I think having that stronger mechanism on expectations, communication from the board is really important. That would be, you know, direction is everything. And sometimes I feel that gets a bit lost. And that's probably as part of, you know, the rotation policy as well. I guess our board is still, you know, it's a relatively new thing for us. I don't think they've ever had to deal with a situation with co CEOs before. So it is a new thing. They're still finding their feet.

Helga Svendsen 18:26

Do you know any other co CEOs?

Amanda Robinson 18:28

I know that there is an architectural practice through run a co CEO role as well have reached out to them in the past. today. Congratulations.

Helga Svendsen 18:40

You and your job share partner are both full time it's not that you're both part time. You are co CEOs, but both full time within the organisation. Right? Correct. As you were thinking about taking it on, was there any discussion about being less than full time out of interest?

Amanda Robinson 18:56

I used to do less than full time. I can't make that work. Now. I've had to make a real shift to say the co CEO stuff comes first. The engineering come second. Is it is such you know, I can't pretend that you know, I'm an engineer, day by day. And this is just something I tackle on the side, because the model is too great for that.

Helga Svendsen 19:23

So CEO first and actually taking the engineering on the side rather than the other way around. Yeah. So when you came into the role, were you not full time?

Amanda Robinson 19:32

No, I used to do a four day week. But I think the board you know, they get to for the price of one effectively, because we are both knee deep in it.

Helga Svendsen 19:43

And as you say, you get that Yin and the Yang, you get the different skills and strength that both of you bring to the role and as long as that yin and the yang work together, constructively and effectively rather than against each other, then why wouldn't you it's just such a great way of getting that extra impact in the role.

Amanda Robinson 20:01

We've not had an instance yet touchwood, where we have, like, you know, vehemently disagreed. And so we've never had to really test that relationship. And I hope we never have to.

Helga Svendsen 20:18

And effect to the to the staff ever play you off against each other. Do you have, you know, staff coming to mom and not getting the right answers or go to Dad?

Amanda Robinson 20:27

Yeah, that does happen, but because we have such strong communication, that it gets found out pretty quickly.

Helga Svendsen 20:35

So yes, yeah. Oh, Amanda, this has been so interesting to learn more about that both how you to operate together, but also some of those insights around the boardroom as well and how the board works? What are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Amanda Robinson 20:53

I think if you're thinking about a co CEO role, or co chair, whatever, embrace it, it can work. And I think it, it helps to, I guess, release the burden from just one person having to take on board everything. You know, that sharing really helps. I would like to we didn't touch on this. But I would like to strongly encourage boards to get females around the table, because I think we bring such a different perspective to conversations. It is, you know, I see it as essential. If particularly in engineering, where it's such a male dominated field, having that different perspective and different insight, I think can really help organisations.

Helga Svendsen 21:42

You get no argument out of me and being able to touch on that even though we didn't in the conversation. That's absolutely fine. And is there a resource you would like to recommend for the take onboard community?

Amanda Robinson 21:52

I'm a big fan of Brene Brown. Read her work. And Glennon Doyle is another one that my walking buddy has loaned me.

Helga Svendsen 22:02

Fantastic. Brene Brown now has quite the reading list. Have you got a favorite amongst them or just Brene Brown overall?

Amanda Robinson 22:10

Just Brene Brown overall. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 22:13

Excellent. All right. We'll put some links to both of I'm pretty sure both of them have websites the Brene Brown and Glennon Doyle. So I'll make sure I'll put links to both of those in the show notes for people. Thank you so much for joining us today Amanda to unpick a little bit more about what being a co CEO was all about. Shout out to Dominique, thank you for putting us in touch. So thank you for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.