# Take on Board

Transcript – Meaghan Dwyer

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Meaghan Dwyer about collective leadership. First, let me tell you about Meaghan. Meaghan is a partner and Executive Director at John Wardle architects. She joined the practice over 20 years ago when the team numbered just eight. Today the practice is led by five partners and the team has grown to 120 people. The business is currently transitioning to a model of collective leadership, with a view to growing the business whilst also retaining their unique culture. She has previously served on a number of advisory committees, including the RMIT architecture program advisory committee, and the building Advisory Council. Welcome to the take on board podcast Meaghan.

Meaghan Dwyer 0:43

Fabulous, thanks Helga. It's terrific to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:45

Oh, I'm so excited to have this conversation about collective leadership. However, before we go there, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me a story about young Meaghan, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Meaghan Dwyer 1:02

Yes, I sometimes reflect on that myself. And one observation that I've made is that both my parents were what I call hobby taskers. And so they were all the time making things and doing things with their hands, whether that was restoring furniture, or gardening, sewing, fixing a car engine, any number of things. They were also politically active. And there were always loads and loads of books around the house. So I think what I learned from my parents was that you could I sort of have this innate belief that you can shape the world around you, whether that's physically through making things or through ideas and political action. So a really fabulous combination of things for an architect. Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 1:49

It's so interesting. Oh, there's so many interesting things there already. But I'm interested that shaping the world around you from that learning and political action, and that that's a key thing for an architect. I'll be honest, I wouldn't have thought in my mind, I wouldn't have necessarily connected just the two parts of it political action and architecture. So talk me through that.

Meaghan Dwyer 2:10

Yes, yeah. Yeah. Look, it's probably in a way a choice that an architect can make that they can bring their? Well, I think, in fact, every architect brings their values to their work, whether they mean it or not. But some architects really operate with a very distinct intent to shape the world around them in a particular way. And I think for me, it's sort of about you know, I have this great passion for cities and a great passion for making cities better. And architecture, of course, makes a big contribution to that. And so I think that, that that's kind of the way that I combine my values and my social political values and my action as an architect to make things.

Helga Svendsen 2:51

And as I say, we'll definitely get on to collective leadership in a moment. But I'm having so much fun digging here. And in fact, I suspect some of it connects to collective leadership in a way. But I'm interested there, you've used values a number of times, what are your key values? And how do they show up for you in your work?

Meaghan Dwyer 3:05

Well, look, I really do believe in a common good, I suppose that the cities and towns built environment that we create really impacts everyone, despite the fact that it's often delivered by actors who have a big part in the play, if you like, I sort of believe that with every change we make to our cities, we're sending them, you know, one particular direction or another. And I do believe that we should be working to make our cities better for everyone, not just for the individual interests that we often encounter in our work as an architect.

Helga Svendsen 3:38

So I can hear in there a bit of a collective view, which might seque us beautifully. collective leadership is something that you are consciously trying to embed in your organization. So can you tell us what collective leadership means to you and how that shows up in your board of directors for your organisation?

Meaghan Dwyer 3:59

Hmm, absolutely. Well, this is really something that were transitioning to for a very long time, we were led by our founding director John Wardle, and he was the majority shareholder. Today, we have five directors, and I might just give them a shout out if I could we have in addition to John, Stephen, me, Matthew Van Coy, and James Loader and myself when I make five. And interestingly, we span across quite a wide age group, probably perhaps as much as 30 years age difference between the oldest and the youngest. And so we're transitioning from a business that was very much led by John into a business that will be led by the five of us collectively. And so I think we are really finding out as we go more and more about collective leadership and how we sort of operate in that way. I have done a just in the course of that transition. I have done a little bit of research and I could read out one or two definitions if that would really help crystallize. Perhaps what we're talking about one I particularly like, we have defined collective leadership as a group of people working together toward a shared goal. When collective leadership is happening, people are internally and externally motivated, working together toward a shared vision within a group and using their unique talents and skills to contribute to the success. Beautiful definition, we have been working together for quite some time. And I think we do work with shared values, which is particularly important, I think, if we're to get this to work, but we do each bring different perspectives, and certainly different skill sets to the table. So I think we're really well positioned to, to come together and work really effectively as a group of leaders.

Helga Svendsen 5:42

I mean, all of the research around diversity shows that diverse groups make better decisions. But sometimes those decisions are harder to come by because of the diversity. It's a bit of a double edged sword in a way, there's better decisions, but they're harder. Firstly, I guess it sounds like you've got that diverse group is that your experience as well, that the decision making is probably stronger. But there's some challenges in that as well.

Meaghan Dwyer 6:05

Again, it's something that we're learning more and more about as we go, I think we do need to take the time, we do need to stop and listen very carefully to what each other is saying. And in fact, you know, taking the different perspectives that people bring, that sort of ends up in a more expensive kind of conversation often, and we're having to sort of funnel it back to, to focus again, on the actual decision that we need at that point in time. I think I would agree that we do make better decisions. And I think the industry that we work in has so many different sort of drivers and you know, long term drivers short term drivers investment for the future, immediate versus immediate needs. So there's a lot of different considerations that we do need to take into account. So yes, decision making can be quite challenging. But I do think that we're becoming more and more effective at getting there more quickly. And I think we're making good sound decisions about the future of the business,

Helga Svendsen 7:01

Just out of interest. So how long did this transition from the single owner model through this broader group? How long has that journey been? Like? When was go to? I mean, now you're still midway through it? I don't think these things are ever finished in a way. But yeah, how far into the journey are you?

Meaghan Dwyer 7:17

The for some time, there have been two directors in the business, and it's probably in the last couple of years that we've actually expanded out to be a group of five. And so I would say that it's in that last two year period where we've really started to workshop, this kind of idea of collective leadership

Helga Svendsen 7:35

In that two years as you've been doing it, what are some of the things both you've done as a group of Board of Directors to try it on for size? And to grow into that? And also within the organisation as well? How has that potentially influenced the organisation's culture? More generally?

Meaghan Dwyer 7:51

Really good question. I probably, perhaps start back to front to say that, I think that the culture of our business for a very long time has had this collective sense to it. So certainly, the way that we work, as a group of architects and a group of designers is very much you know, kind of collective model. So will often come around the table together to solve a design challenge and to set creative direction. So in a way it is inherent in the business. And it is perhaps now that we are sort of reflecting that culture in our governance structure. So perhaps the a bit the opposite way around. I'm sure there's also impacts down the other way. Now, we're currently a business for about 120. And so it is, in fact, 120 people who need to shift to work in this new way. It's not just the five directors.

Helga Svendsen 8:41

It's interesting hearing that, that it's kind of that bottom up approach rather than top down, the organisation was already working in a collective way. So the leadership of it is kind of catching up in a way to that collective way of working rather than the other way around. That's really interesting as well, that it brings it in that direction as well. It's a great thing. I think that the leadership of the organisation, then recognize that and amend the way they're working to reflect the organisation as well.

Meaghan Dwyer 9:10

Many of us have been in the practice for quite a long time. So in a way, it's sort of an extension of our own growth, in fact that we've stepped into sort of leadership positions in the business. And then after that, we've sort of stepped into these governance positions. So it's sort of been, we've been able to grow our own skills and expertise and contribution in parallel with the growth of the business from eight to 120. Yeah, I feel very fortunate for that opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 9:36

So I'm wondering then, in that growing process, both of the organisation and growing into the collective leadership processes, or I'm wondering what the growing pains have been in that because there's sometimes are both in terms of the growth of the business but also, using that more collective model in a leadership sense. Has there been any that you've observed, that you're willing to share with us?

Meaghan Dwyer 9:57

We're used to growing pains, the status just having a continual sort of growth path over such a long period of time. So we do sort of recognize that they come with the territory a bit, in terms of just that the change in governance, I think, for all of us stepping into the director role, we've probably had to, in a way, take off our career path hash and put on director hat or a business hash, and really shift our thinking to focus on the responsibility, we now have to sort of direct the business. So that's certainly something that I think we've each had to kind of grapple with. And then in doing that, we've then had to really focus on the relationships we have with each other and make sure they're as productive as they possibly can be. If we think about the last few years, of course, we've been through the pandemic, just before that, a year before that, we did open a Sydney studio. So there have been quite a few significant challenges that we've had to navigate as a group just in that fairly short space of time. And it's not without its tensions from time to time. But I personally would prefer to work with a little bit of sort of productive tension rather than avoid the difficult conversations.

Helga Svendsen 11:11

Productive tension. Tell me more, it sounds like a very interesting concept. So tell tell me more. What does that mean to you? And how does it show up?

Meaghan Dwyer 11:18

Look, for me, it just means not avoiding the difficult questions. And that inevitably, there are different viewpoints or blind spots, or challenges that we might be facing personally, that we need to make the others aware of, it could be any number of things, but to really sort of sit in that slightly uncomfortable space and address those things is just so incredibly important to collective leadership. And in some ways, that has also been an aspect of the culture in the business. Because I think a creative design process requires that there is a great deal of trust, that we do share were quite vulnerable, we share ideas and opinions with the expectation that they will be perhaps challenged. And that, you know, we're very committed to delivering the best design work we possibly can. And so we're sort of used to that sort of slightly uncomfortable space in that way. And really, again, it's sort of reflected, or must be reflected in our governance structure if we're to lead the business in the best way we possibly can.

Helga Svendsen 12:23

So then in the governance space, in the boardroom, and collectively, how does that vulnerability show up and trust that like both sides of the coin, they're connected to each other? How does it show up for you in the boardroom?

Meaghan Dwyer 12:36

I think we've learned to be quite sort of frank with each other. And I think collective leadership is about the group coming together. But what it depends upon is having very positive relationships, one on one. And so if you, I can't quite do the maths, but you know, you end up with between five different people, you end up with many one to one, relationships, and each of those has to be worked on, I suppose you know that the level of trust and vulnerability needs to be across all of those relationships. And I think, at times, we each need to be reminded of that. And in order to remain productive, we really need to be having the right conversations with the right one of the five if or two of the five, whatever combination it is, but that direct line of communication is key to maintaining that trust and vulnerability.

Helga Svendsen 13:26

I'd be interested to hear your reflections about how you make sure the board conversations are, you know, governance and strategic. When you're all wearing a couple of hats.

Meaghan Dwyer 13:37

Yes, a very good question. And I suspect this is a challenge that most small to medium businesses have. We often use the expression rabbit hole, if we're heading down into an operational question that isn't relevant to a strategic conversation. But we do have to remind each other about that and sort of refocus on the the question at hand, not easy. I'm sure that we often come to any kind of strategic conversation, having just left multiple sort of day to day activities. And so it can be a real challenge. We do contemplate the benefit of having perhaps an advisory board or other other board members, we feel that that's perhaps a step that's ahead of us just at the minute we'd like to kind of consolidate the way that we're working together at the moment before we sort of take a step and do that. But I think that, generally speaking, we would all say that we can sort of see benefit in in having that perhaps more objective viewpoint around the table.

Helga Svendsen 14:35

It's just an interesting challenge. You know, if there was a nice neat line between this is management, this is governance, then you could be really clear in it. But of course, we all know that it's not a nice, neat line and it moves. So is it the same group? Is the board also the management team or are there additional people?

Meaghan Dwyer 14:52

Very good question. The management group is wider than the board. We have a number of people who join us in those meetings. We have a finance leader, we have a principal who looks after the probably operating officer close to, and then we have a number of our senior team join us as well. And they're minor shareholders. So they do have a small interest in that in the business as well. But we probably come together as a group of perhaps 10 or 12.

Helga Svendsen 15:20

Right, interesting. You've talked about how the business has grown, and how the board has grown into that collective leadership. I'm interested in how you've grown in the business and how you've grown up in the business. What are your reflections there?

Meaghan Dwyer 15:34

Well, I must say, it's been very compelling. 20 years I joined is quite a young architect. And I really, I was very fortunate to kind of join the business at the time that its growth trajectory kind of really took off. So as a young architect, I found myself suddenly leading these really quite large, complex projects in the higher education sector actually, is where a lot of my work has been. And that through some very good fortune, and lots of hard work that that has grown into actually really quite a broad portfolio where we've worked with many universities right across Australia to deliver some really significant projects. And from that, we've sort of broadened the portfolio out now to include a number of sort of public sectors if you like, so we're just about to complete our first hospital, the Victorian Heart Hospital out at Monash University, we're just doing the Bendigo Law Courts, which is $150 million development out in regional Victoria. And so we've really sort of expanded the portfolio out to to include all of these sectors. So that's certainly been a particularly rewarding thing to be a part of. And I suppose, as I mentioned before, I do feel like I've continued to grow. And I've been able to kind of step into it, perhaps first of all, a role where I've contributed to the management of the practice. And now of course, the governance of the practice. Yeah, so it's a business that I know particularly well, it's a business that I've helped to sort of shape. And it's a business where over time, we have invited sort of more and more people to join us to bring their own skills and experience to the table. So I must say we benefit from having a really extraordinary team. They're very sort of skilled professionals, very creative thinkers, we have all manner of sort of extra curricular activities that they also sort of bring to the practice. So real pleasure to work with them

Helga Svendsen 17:33

Extra curricular activities that they bring to the practice. I'm intrigued, like, what?

Meaghan Dwyer 17:38

We have musicians, we have photographers, one of our architects has consistently been winning prizes for his furniture design, we have all of this kind of creative skill and energy that we probably benefit from despite the fact it's not directly related to architecture. But we're really appreciate the richness that that brings to their thinking and celebrate with them when they have these successes.

Helga Svendsen 18:01

Now, just because you started talking about some of the buildings or developments that you've been involved in, I want to circle back because way back at the start, you said, this process is about your vision and values coming to light. I'm wondering if there's a particular building or development that you've been involved in, that you can tell us about that kind of showcases that vision and values from you.

Meaghan Dwyer 18:21

One I'm particularly fond of is the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, which sits down on Sturt Street, you may know, yes, thank you, we worked with Melbourne Uni for quite a while on that one, just to find how it might be feasible. And that was sort of looking at the brief and understanding, balancing that with the cost and looking at site locations, looked at different possibilities of co locating with industry partners. So we really did a deep exploration with Melbourne Uni to kind of arrive at what would be feasible, it then went out to a design competition. And so we were one of five architects to then prepare a design to be selected as the architects for that project. And I must say we did try particularly hard for that one. And we're very fortunate to be selected for it. And so what I love about that building is that it sits in a very public location. But in fact, the the changes that we made around that building really opened the university campus out to the public street. And, of course, this is a theme that's consistent across many universities that they want to engage much more with their communities and with their industry partners. And then the building also really invites people to understand what's happening within it. So the very large circular window that you might know, is really designed to allow pacifiers to understand what happens in that space. And those large music rehearsal spaces typically, or technically perhaps, need to be these black boxes that are acoustically isolated, so to propose a big round window in the side of it is an unusual thing, but we certainly we in fact, we worked with Amanda from Marshall Day who you've spoken with, recently, we worked with her team to really understand how we could achieve that technically. And we were able to really, I guess, add something back to the public realm and enrich the experience of people in the streets. So it's not just a building for the people within us, but it's for the people who pass by to have beautiful. Thank you.

Helga Svendsen 20:23

I'm glad I asked that it really brings it to life. Meaghan fabulous conversation, what are the key things you want people to take away from the broad ranging conversation that we've had today?

Meaghan Dwyer 20:34

Well I suppose we've focused on collective leadership. And I think we've certainly found that to be a really productive way of working. And I would encourage people to think about the benefits that come with collective leadership. And, of course, one of the challenges, we spoke about whether the tensions or the productive tension and the willingness to kind of sit in that space to, and I believe that's probably where you get the most value in a way. But of course, you do have to be prepared to stay there. So I think they're probably the two key points that I would have. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 21:06

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

Meaghan Dwyer 21:11

Do you know, as we've embarked on this collective leadership journey, I have done some research to find articles and books that do speak about collective leadership. And in fact, there are two that I would share. One is the five elements of collective leadership. And the other is called collective leadership, the what, why and how I think there are two really good sort of short form documents that really do talk about collective leadership in a really kind of clear and easy to understand way. So I've found them to be really valuable.

Helga Svendsen 21:39

Oh, fantastic. If you send us through those links, we will make sure they appear in the show notes for people to learn more about collective leadership. Meaghan, thank you. It has been such a joy to have this conversation. So many interesting things to think about in here. So thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today to share your collective leadership wisdom with their take on board community today.

Meaghan Dwyer 22:02

It's been my absolute pleasure. Thank you very much.