

Take on Board

Guest: [Michelle Gibbings](#)

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Michelle Gibbings about what it takes to exercise influence inside the boardroom and outside the boardroom. Michelle is a change leadership and career expert. She's the author of Step Up - How to Build your Influence at Work and Career Leap - How to Reinvent and Liberate Your Career. Michelle is obsessed with unlocking high impact choices to accelerate meaningful progress. She's enabling a new breed of leader one that's fit for the future of work. As a highly sought after speaker and facilitator, Michelle works with leading edge organizations to optimize outcomes by building the capability, capacity and conviction of their leaders to lead. She works with some of Australia's most respected organizations including ANZ, Coles, Orica, John Holland, ME Bank, and Telstra, along with government departments and agencies. She's a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, an alumna of Leadership Victoria's Williamson Community Leadership Program, and she regularly appears and writes for major national publications and media outlets. Michelle is a director of the Arts Law Center, and a former non executive director and company secretary at Red Stitch Actors Theatre and three MBSFM. Welcome to the take on board podcast Michelle.

Michelle Gibbings 1:18

Hello, Helga, I'm so happy to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:21

I'm super pleased to have you. And you've literally written the book about influence. So it is always a topic for people when I'm running my group programs around influence. So can't wait to have the conversation. But before we do that, I'd love to learn a bit more about you. So tell me what was a young Michelle Like?

Michelle Gibbings 1:42

Oh, what was young Michelle like? I was one of those children who was always curious, it was the why this, why are we doing that? Where are we going? So I have, you know, I think throughout my life had this insatiable curiosity and love of learning. And that was certainly prevalent when I was a child. I was a very happy kid, I think I had a very blessed childhood, it was a fairly low stress, easy type of childhood, I was the youngest of four, I grew up in Brisbane. And I think when you're the youngest, it's always about trying to catch up to everybody else. And so you learn a lot from the people around you. So I look back on my childhood thing I just had, I had fun. I was really it was great.

Helga Svendsen 2:28

And knowing what you do now, I know you're still having fun in everything you do. So with the governance role that you've got, when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in some sort of governance role?

Michelle Gibbings 2:39

Oh, I worked in financial services. And one of my roles in financial services, I sort of found myself one day working in risk and compliance, and loved it absolutely loved it much to the not horror, but surprised the people around me. And there is a really strong connection between compliance and risk and governance, because in some respects is instead of all of the same genre. And then I was looking for that, you know, I want to do something where I feel like I'm giving back to the community. And so I got connected with an organization at that time that did matching between people who worked in corporate roles, and not for profits, who needed support. And I did some volunteer work for them. And that then led into my first board role. So it was almost not deliberate. Whereas I find often these days I meet people who go, I want to be on a board. And I don't feel like I ever thought I want to be on a board. It just organically happened. And then I found I learned a lot in that environment. But at the same time, I had a lot to contribute as well. And so there was this lovely meeting of the minds

Helga Svendsen 3:43

Which one was your first board role?

Michelle Gibbings 3:45

So my first board role was 3MBS, which is a community radio station, classical base station, I'm still a member of 3MBS. And I've always kept my membership up, because I had this thing in the back of my head, maybe when I get older, because I do a lot of voluntary work in terms of the announcers love the idea of at some stage going back and becoming a radio announcer.

Helga Svendsen 4:05

Well, from this side of the table, the microphone certainly becomes you. Maybe you could. And so you're currently on the board of the Arts Law Center, Australia, tell us about that organization.

Michelle Gibbings 4:18

Amazing work. And I think that's a really critical thing as a director, that you are on a board where you really feel a connection with the work that the organization does. And they provide low cost or pro bono legal advice, legal services to artists. And they do a lot of work in indigenous communities. And in the indigenous communities, it's working with the artists to make sure that they've got probate wills sorted, because what happens is often the indigenous artists when they die, they don't have a will, the money goes to the government. And so they want to make sure that the money stays in the family or stays in the community. And they also get involved in the lobbying side of things. So for example, there's been a lot of work done recently around the fake arts campaign, because there's a lot of issues in the indigenous communities about either fake art that is not actually of indigenous heritage, and also people getting ripped off. So copyright, and people not

understanding that with the artist, if you might buy the painting, but the copyright for the art still belongs to the artists

Helga Svendsen 5:31

Yeah, I can see why you would be involved in that organization, what important work that they do, and how incredibly interesting all the time.

Michelle Gibbings 5:37

Absolutely, because every time we have a board meeting, the CEO will share stories about work the organization has done that helps an artist protect their work. And so we will have musicians who will come to us because they've written a piece of music. And they may be approached by someone because they someone wants to use that piece of music in an ad. And the artists weren't necessarily understand what their rights are. And so they need people to work with to be able to get the right advice, so that they can then protect their work, but also make money from it. Because at the end of the day, you know, we see a lot about artists who make a lot of money. But the average artist doesn't make a lot of money. And yet art and culture is intrinsic to a healthy functioning society.

Helga Svendsen 6:27

You said every board meeting, you hear about some of those stories? Is that a deliberate and conscious part of your board agenda? Or is it peripheral to some of the things that you hear on the agenda? I'm I'm asking because I'm on the board of the Royal Women's Hospital. And we consciously and deliberately, every board meeting will have a patient story so that we, for the exact reason you're outlining are in touch with the work that we do. So I'm wondering if yours

Michelle Gibbings 6:51

Yeah. And also, when you think about it, if there's a board member, you can't speak to the work that your organization does, how do you get the message out there. And that's probably one of the key things. Royal Women's, it's a well known brand, Arts Law Center of Australia, when I first joined this board, people would have said to me, I've never heard of it. So there would be a lot of people who haven't heard of the work that the organization does. And as a director, one of your roles is to be an advocate, and to help make those connections and help raise the profile of the work that the organization does.

Helga Svendsen 7:23

The main thing we want to talk about today, you know, you are literally the author of the book around influence. And as I mentioned earlier, it's one of the things that in all of my board programs, when we are choosing topics, and when people want to talk about those things that are challenging for them as board directors influence comes up constantly. How should we effectively influence within the boardroom? How can we effectively influence and advocate as you've mentioned outside the boardroom? What are some of your tips and tricks that you can share with our people about how to influence?

Michelle Gibbings 7:57

So I always start from the perspective, understand your intent. Because often when people think influence, I think Machiavellian, they think this is all about power. And I often have particularly women who said to me, I don't like that whole power thing. I'm not good with politics. And I go, Well think about your intent. If you can't influence you can't get heard. If you can't get heard, you can't get your agenda across and your agenda, your intent is a good agenda. It's a good intent, you're, you're influencing for good, you're not influencing for evil. And often when we think about how to influence we think about the other person, I need to influence this other person. Actually, no, you need to influence yourself, it starts with you. Understand who you are, what you stand for, your mindset, your trigger points, how you react under pressure, because when you're in a board environment, if you're not conscious of how you're reacting to the conversation and what's going on, you're then not aware of whether you're being triggered by conversations, and it's very easy, or the research shows this to go into fight or flight. I'm in an environment, I feel out of my depth, or perhaps someone said something that I'm reacting to, I'm in fight or flight. And if I'm in fight or flight, what happens is the thinking part of the brain slows down the thinking part of the brain doesn't process the way it normally processes. So I always say to people that I'm working with, start with you understand your trigger points, understand how you manage your energy, understand how you manage how you're feeling at any given moment. And notice that because that awareness piece is really important, as soon as you're aware. It's not feeling quite okay, then you can go Okay, so how do I then deal with this, and that's where meditation, mindfulness, breathing techniques and practices, all make a difference, because what you want to be able to do is slow yourself down. So you're conscious of how you're reacting to what's going on around you. So you can then deliberately respond, and that deliberate response pieces, then understanding the people around the table, understanding their agendas, understanding how you relate and interact with them. Because sometimes influence isn't when you're in the room, influence is happening when you're outside the room. And all of the effort that you put into building relationships. And that connection, and the camaraderie plays a role. When you're in the room. I always take people through a process around, understand yourself, understand the context and environment in which you're working. And then understand the other people that are in the room as well.

Helga Svendsen 10:33

In your roles, and in particular, in your board roles. For example, you've talked about building relationships, what are some of the things that you've done, to build your relationships with your co directors?

Michelle Gibbings 10:44

I always go think long term, not short term, and it is a slow burn. And I think that's the key thing as a director, because you're coming into an environment and there's that desire, I need to have impact, I need to have impact quickly. But I also think there's real value, particularly the first couple of board meetings, sitting back and watching what's going on watching the dynamics, listening, learning, watching how things play out, really understanding the context, and then meeting outside that board meeting with each of those directors individually, so that you're building one on one relationships with them. And I've found that as I've built those one on one relationships, that's given strength to my preparedness in the boardroom to speak up at the right time. And also have a not for

profit boards, you know, not that turnover is higher, but you do have this natural turnover of board directors, you know, and I certainly know now with Arts Law, I'm now in that position where apart from a couple of other people around the table, I'm the person with the longest history. And when you have the longest history, people naturally then start to look to you, as the wise one in the room. And you kind of go interesting if you watch how the dynamics start to shift, because you've been there for longer. So you've got longer organizational memory as to what's happened and what hasn't happened. And the other key thing for me is recognizing that everyone who's in the room, bring something to the table and really understanding what is it that that director is bringing to the table? How does it differ from what I'm bringing? And how do I learn from them? Because I think being on a board, even if you're still on a corporate role, or in a government position, if you can get yourself on a not for profit or some type of advisory board. Wow, it's a great learning environment. And so I know for me, I've always been of the view, I never wanted to do that as a future career, the whole non executive director get on ASX listed boards. I had made that decision years ago. But I love still being on a not for profit board from the learning. But also from the giving back.

Helga Svendsen 12:49

You mentioned that earlier about your first board that you felt like you're making a contribution and you will also learning things, what are some of those key things?

Michelle Gibbings 12:58

I think you learn about yourself. And you're learning about how a board works from a reality perspective. So it's very easy to read governance principles and governance structures and governance frameworks. And then when you're in a board, you realize that there's a dynamic to it, that is quite different to what you're reading on paper. And also realizing that governance does need to be fit for purpose. So having been in a corporate environment where I've understood large governance frameworks, you can't apply that to a not for profit, because they would drown in the paperwork. And so really understanding what do they need? What's going to help them? What's going to make sure that we're making good decisions, and that we're discharging our duty of care? How much how little and where's that balance point? And I certainly know that in doing what I'm doing now, I rely on my learnings from when I was working in corporate, but also my learnings from what I did the company director course. And I often say to my coaching clients, the company directors course, even if you're not thinking about being a company director, is probably one of the best courses I've ever done for just understanding how organizations fit together, how they work, and how they should work, how perhaps they don't work. So as a just a general piece of training, brilliant thing to do.

Helga Svendsen 14:25

Absolutely. I'm all about getting people on boards. But that experience of being on a board, when you report to a board, if you're on another board, it's an amazing insight that you can get around your own day job of reporting to a board when you've been on the other side of the table.

Michelle Gibbings 14:40

Absolutely. And you get to see what a good director looks like and what a not good director looks like. And if I go back to my days when I was working in financial services, and I was in a role where I used to go to board meetings, and it would be particularly interesting to watch certain directors, because you knew the ones that were really good. They had read everything. They knew what they needed to focus on. They've done their homework, they came prepared. And you would sometimes see occasions where the directors were more prepared than the executives, because the executive would think, Oh, this is an easy topic, I'll wing my way through it. But the director would have very clearly done their homework and the executive hadn't. And that was always fascinating to watch.

Helga Svendsen 15:21

But that would certainly be a lesson there for those who are reporting to a board when you've been in that sort of boardroom to never be underprepared again.

Michelle Gibbings 15:30

And not take the situation for granted. And I remember there was one board director in particular, and there's some few exactly how this person is really annoying. They asked too many questions. And I think that they just doing their job, and they're doing their job well. And I think that's a reminder, there's a lot of cachet, a lot of kudos associated with being on a board. And I always say to people, it's a big responsibility. Huge, huge financial implications, like on listed, boards if things go wrong. You're not just there for fun, it's a job. And so even when you're on a not for profit board, and I don't get paid any money for being on my not for profit board, and it can take actually quite a bit of time, because I'm on a subcommittee, and there's work that needs to get done. And you can't just be on the board and cruise, you have to be focused and go this matters. So the work I do matters just as much as other work that I'm doing that I get paid for. Because there's nothing worse than being on a board and you watch a fellow director who doesn't pull their weight

Helga Svendsen 16:33

Again, advice for people listening, be prepared

Michelle Gibbings 16:36

When it comes back into that influence piece, because your reputation is always being shaped. And so when I've sat on boards with people who don't do their job, well, I look at them and then go, one, I'd never recommend them for another board. And two, I would never want to work with them. Because they haven't taken their job seriously. And that's the key thing with when you're thinking about how you influence. Everything you do every single day matters. And I often think people go, I'm going to work out who I influence. And therefore I'm going to work out who I think matters. And I go well, actually everybody matters. Because you also don't understand or know relationships and connections. And so if I go back to my first ever board role, and I still remember this quite clearly because I'd been put up for the board by this organization that did the matching. I'd been through the interview. And I've been interviewed by the company secretary and by the chair. And then at the end of the meeting, they said we need to do reference checks for you. And I said, that's fine. And then I'm waiting outside the meeting to go back to my office and the chair comes past and he's not

where you going unless I'm going back into town. He said, would you like a lift? Lovely. By the time we got back into town, because he knew people that I knew. He said to me, we don't need to worry about those reference checks. It's good, you'll be fine. And so it was a real reminder for me, networks matter. And it was that whole, I still remember I got back to my desk and I rang my husband said, Oh my god, I got it. And he said Why? And I said because I knew the right names. And it was literally that and even getting on to Arts Law. It was a connection, there was an arts law director who was coming off, he was moving into a senior government role, he could no longer be on the board. They wanted a board director who is based in Melbourne. And he was asked to recommend someone, he recommended me, I had the meeting, my skill set match the skill set that we're looking to close. So I wouldn't have been recommended if I didn't have a good reputation. So that's why that influence piece, it's very pervasive. And you can see people who the influence is... doesn't feel genuine, it's I'm going to influence or build a relationship to get something and like it just doesn't work like that. It's got to be something that you constantly focus on.

Helga Svendsen 18:52

So for that first role, the one where you got the ride and compared connections, not quite that blatantly, compared connections. And before you know it, you're in the role, building your networks is key, and then being able to use them effectively. What are some ways that you've used to build your networks effectively, and to do that in a really genuine way?

Michelle Gibbings 19:12

It does require time and effort. And I think one of the things that I often find, and once again, I think this is a female thing. Often females will say to me, I don't have time, and they don't see networking as part of their job. And I often say, change the word, this isn't about networks it is about building relationships and building connections. And so you need to find people that you genuinely connect with, it's very hard to build a relationship with someone you don't like. So find relationships that have depth and have meaning and go broad. Because the broader your network, the greater you are able to see what's even available. One thing I am naturally good at is maintaining long term relationships. So the person who connected me to the Arts Law board, that is someone who I used to work with my first job in financial services, he hired me, and that was almost 20 years ago. Now, I haven't worked with him for probably 18 years, and I still have a relationship with him. So there are people through my life who I've maintained relationships and connections with any it's, you know, he now lives back in Brisbane. And so you catch up with him when you're in Brisbane, you know, do things that have a personal touch, I remember people's birthdays, and but it's because they matter to me. And so you know, you can't keep in contact with everybody. But I do think LinkedIn plays a role in these. And LinkedIn is a great way of knowing where people go of being able to congratulate them, when they've moved to a new role seeing something they've published, and you've got a genuine interest in it. There's the light touch, but then there's the times where it's also the heavy touch in terms of you know, you making time to catch up with them. I think the thing that's the most challenging at the moment with the whole relationship and connection piece is particularly through things like you know, all the social media platforms, there's a sense of, well, I've kept in contact with you electronically, so therefore, I still have a relationship with you. And like, yeah, that's plays a role. But where's the the interest in what that person is doing? Where's the offer of support the offer of help? Where's the I've seen that this has happened, and you might be interested in this. So I will

often find articles that I think people are interested in. And I will then randomly send them to people, because that's part of my keep in touch strategy. And I may not have the time to catch up with everyone who wants to see me for coffee. But I'll make time for phone calls. And I know a lot of people who do this really well, they will use their downtime in between meetings, walking between meetings to just ring people and have a quick chat. And I don't think we do enough of that. The one on one piece

Helga Svendsen 21:55

Of actually picking up the phone and having a conversation, agreed, it doesn't happen so much anymore. I think that sharing of things that you know people are interested in is part of the genuineness that you mentioned before as well.

Michelle Gibbings 22:07

Yeah. And that means you need to understand people and understand where they've gone. I mean, I find it really interesting the number of people who you have nothing to do with for years and years, and then they pop up, because something in their life circumstances have changed. And all of a sudden, I need something from you. And I think yeah, I really want to help you. But on the list of priorities, I've heard nothing from you in 20 years, and now you're wanting something. And this is about you not about me, it doesn't feel like there's a genuineness, and that's the thing with relationships, you know, people talk about the bank balance, and it is you put in something eventually, you know, you do get things in return. And it's not that transactional. But you do need to be careful that if you're not spending the energy to nurture a network, when you want help from your network, you'll find people will help you to a certain degree, but they might not help you as much as they would have. If you had put some energy into that and network earlier.

Helga Svendsen 23:00

The investment in the investment out...

Michelle Gibbings 23:02

...exactly

Helga Svendsen 23:03

It builds. So I'm wondering if this was a board meeting, and you were writing the minutes of the meeting, and you had to just draw out the key things for people to remember, what are the key points you want people to take away today?

Michelle Gibbings 23:15

Spend time on you know who you are, know what you stand for, because that's really important to then, make sure there's alignment with the type of board that you want to go and work with. Because if the alignment is out, it's very hard to influence about something that you're not passionate about. Understand the organizational context in which that board is operating, that you're then moving yourself into, because there will be organizational dynamics that you need to understand if you don't understand that it's hard to influence. Understand the people around the

table. Who are they? What do they stand for, what makes them tick? Build the relationship one on one, because that one on one then becomes that sort of coalesces into what that group is like and how it functions. And so be prepared to take your time, don't expect to walk in on board meeting number one, and be the only person of influence around everybody around the table, it's okay to take your time, do it deliberately and slowly, so that you're having the right impact at the right time.

Helga Svendsen 24:19

Again, if this were a board meeting, and we were writing the action sheet for it around those three things, understanding yourself understanding the context, understanding others, what might be, you know, a couple of small practical steps that we can put on the action sheet for people to do?

Michelle Gibbings 24:33

One of the things that I often say to people, this can sound like OTT, but it can literally change your life is building in a meditation practice. Because there's a lot going on in a board meeting, there's a lot of activity, there's a lot of different players. And it's very easy to let things don't get away from you. But to miss what's going on, you need to be present, to be present, you need to be mindful, to be mindful, you need to be able to slow yourself down, and to slow your mind down. That's the practice of meditation. And so the more present you are, the more presence you will have. So if you do nothing else, but build meditation into a practice for you, that will help you influence.

Helga Svendsen 25:18

I can't recall who it is. But I was talking to somebody recently, and they start their board meetings with a meditation, just a short 60 second meditation to get everybody present, which I hadn't heard of before. But it's a lovely way of building in that presence in the room

Michelle Gibbings 25:31

And it builds connection.

Helga Svendsen 25:33

And finally, although I've got at least one tip on this, it's always great to share a resource. So a resource that might be a book or a TED talk. Now one of them is obviously your book, and I will definitely share a link to that in the show notes. But is there a resource you'd like to share around influence whether it's a TED talk or a book or an article?

Michelle Gibbings 25:56

Oh, that's so hard. There's so many look up half of my book, the other book that I would suggest that I think it's a really useful book and helping you make that alignment piece is Bill George's True North. And it's a great book because it helps you look at and understand who you are, what you stand for, and the alignment of your values between your value set and the values of the organization that you're working with. I'm a massive reader. And so often people will say to me, I don't know how you managed to get through so many books, but I read a book a week. And that's a discipline for me.

Helga Svendsen 26:26

Wow, amazing, Michelle.

Michelle Gibbings 26:28

And the other thing, if you find it hard to read books, use an app like blinkist just the whole concept behind blinkist is that you can read the book in in a blink. And so in about 10 minutes, you can read the key points in a book. And you may then work out I don't need to read the rest of the book, because I've got most of the ideas that I need. But one of your critical success factors as a director is knowledge. So you need to read widely, because it's not just about understanding HR practices and risk practices, look at technology and technology trends. So you should have a constant stream of information that is coming into you that you can use. And so I have deliberately I have multiple email addresses. And I have one email address that is just for research and information. And everything goes into that because I then doesn't clog up my day to day email. And I can then when I choose going to that to pull the research that I need.

Helga Svendsen 27:25

That is an excellent practical tip as well. And just because you're a read a book a week person, what are you reading right now?

Michelle Gibbings 27:31

I am reading Melinda Gates book, which has just been released, which is all about empowering women. And it was fantastic. And then the book that I finished reading sort of a week or so ago, which was at the moment for me, my book of the year, is Educated by Tara Westover. It's a nonfiction book. It's a woman who grows up in a fundamentalist Mormon household in America. And it is fascinating,

Helga Svendsen 28:02

Really powerful. I'll make sure we put links to all of those books in the show notes if people want to share them as well. Thank you so much for giving your time to us today. There are so many incredible, broader tips around influence but also some incredibly practical tips as well like having a separate email inbox. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us today. I know that the take on board community will find a huge amount in there that will help them out in their own governance journey as well. So thanks, Michelle.

Michelle Gibbings 28:29

My pleasure. It's been fun. Thank you so much for having me.