



Take on Board

Transcript – Fiona Williams

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Fiona Williams. Fiona is a board member of the Great Ocean Road health board and was previously the chair of Bethany Board of management. She's the child site volunteering hub project lead at Australian volunteers International. And she's worked in the international development sector as a child protection safeguarding specialist for over 15 years. Having previously worked at Save the Children. Fiona started her career as a family and child youth lawyer. Welcome to the take on board podcast, Fiona.

Fiona Williams 0:29

Thank you.

Helga Svendsen 0:31

So Fiona, we've heard your official bio, and it's always good to hear a little bit more about people. So tell me what was a young Fiona like, and what lessons might you have learned in your childhood that have taken you into the future?

Fiona Williams 0:44

I think as a young Fiona, I, I became aware fairly early on about, I suppose social justice issues if you put that into child friendly language. Growing up in my family, we talked about a lot of issues around Society and, and people and I very early on really felt an urge if you like to try and work towards improving the lives of others and so, as a young person, I started to develop an interest in that in my studies, you know, studying revolutionary history and carrying that through to university and, and just becoming quite an activist. And that carried with me from a very early age, a sense of social justice. Absolutely. So that really continued right through my university years and by early working years when I started my career and then you know, after a few years actually changed to work in the community legal space because I became very aware of the rights of children and felt that was an area I really could contribute to.

Helga Svendsen 1:54

You then joined the board I know you joined the board of Bethany and and now on the Great Ocean Road Health Service. Can you just tell us a little bit about both of those organizations so people know what they're about?

Fiona Williams 2:07

Yes. So Bethany Community Services is based in Geelong, and is an independent not for profit community service organization, working with communities in the Bowen and southwest regions of Victoria. It has a very long history having started as the Bethany babies home, originally, so well over 100 years old. But Bethany has an incredible approach to working with the communities in the region. It's a very rights based organization that looks at working with their clients to treating clients with a lot of dignity and respect and working with them to improve their lives. And whether that might be issues such as family violence, Child Protection, men's behavior programs, gambling help, so yeah, they have a range of really good stuff services that, and it's a very well respected organization in the community.

Helga Svendsen 3:04

So how did you land on that board? How did you start your board career?

Fiona Williams 3:09

Well? It's interesting because at the time that I did join the Bethany board, I actually hadn't been thinking about a board. I was working in the international development sector. As a child protection specialist, I had two young children, so fairly busy, but it was always very much with me, the desire to work in the social justice space. So I was just at a dinner in July, I'm chatting to another woman and she was telling me she was on the board and explaining what they do. And I started I suppose, talking about my work and my values if you like, and she asked if I would be interested in applying for the board, which was an incredible opportunity and it really started my path in terms of board passion.

Helga Svendsen 4:01

So just a almost random chat at an event and lands you on that board, which is, again, a great lesson for people around networks and letting people know that board work might be something they're interested in, although it sounds like that wasn't what you said. She just thought they were interested in you.

Fiona Williams 4:18

Yes, which was, you know, a lovely compliment. And I think for me, too, I and I certainly would encourage is I, you know, I had no board experience, I had obviously my work experience. I originally thought, Oh, you know, really, should I be on a board? What can I bring? You know, I haven't had this experience in governance before. But then, you know, once you sit down and have a thing, well, yes, I have worked in certain areas I've studied. And also, you know, you bring those values and that sense of commitment to certain issues. So I think that is really appreciate it on a board. I mean, yes, you've got your technical skills that you bring, but I think it's really important to realize That those values are important as well as almost just as important. And you can contribute by bringing that commitment to issues such as social justice or rights based issues. You shouldn't be discouraged if you, you know, haven't had governance experience before, because it's a great environment also, to learn all these skills once you join.

Helga Svendsen 5:22

So when you joined, Bethany, you've come on, you weren't expecting necessarily to end up on a board. How did you land in there? What sort of induction processes did they have in place to make sure you really landed well in that role?

Fiona Williams 5:36

So Bethany was terrific with that. I was presented with a an induction manual, if you like, which was not a huge, great big document. It was nice and user friendly, and provided me with sort of the key areas that I needed to be aware of around directors duties, what were the key pieces of legislation that were relevant to a community services organization. How board meetings work, you know how papers were set out what was required of us. And, you know, obviously a background around the organization and the, you know, strategic direction and vision of the organization, which was obviously very helpful. But I think what was more beneficial was that I was appointed a mentor, as a new board member. And my mentor was a board member who had been on the board for quite some time. And she was available to me just to go and have a cup of coffee and have a chat and see how I was going. It was particularly useful if you know all about this issue came up at the board meeting last night. I was a bit, you know, not quite sure what the context or background was, and she was able to all Yes, well, there's quite a history to that discussion. We've been talking about this for some time. I can fill you in on the gaps there. She would be able to explain the processes to me and it was just fantastic to have someone that you could just throw the questions to that perhaps you didn't want to ask in the board. Meeting. So I found that incredibly useful and gave me a lot of confidence to continue with the board.

Helga Svendsen 7:07

It's really interesting. Some boards do have a board body or board mentor, in practical terms. How did it work? Did you meet with her before you started on the board? Or was an afterwards? Would you meet? You know, once a month over the phone face to face? How did it work?

Fiona Williams 7:22

Yeah, I certainly did meet with her before I joined the board. So after you know, my interview, process and acceptance, then I did have a first meeting with her. And she also took me into Bethany and we met the CEO walked around, met a number of the staff members. So that was a lovely introduction. It was pretty informal. You know, we would catch up either for coffee face to face or occasionally she'd call me or I give her a call. So it was honest, I suppose a needs basis if you like, and it lasted for about 12 months.

Helga Svendsen 7:51

So you were on the board of Bethany for about six years all together and at some stage in that you became the chair.

Fiona Williams 7:58

Yes, that's right. Yeah. So The maximum term on the board and in the last, I think, three, four years I was in the role of chair of the board. So, as you can see, I obviously really enjoyed being part of Bethany board out, I learned a lot, and then was able to contribute in the role of chair which was fantastic.

Helga Svendsen 8:21

How did that transition happen?

Fiona Williams 8:23

So after really learning about the organization through the subcommittees and being involved in the events of Bethany, became Deputy Chair, I was nominated by other board members. And after a few years, our Chair resigned. So it was suggested to me that I could take on the role of chairs, I had a good knowledge of the organization, I had a good relationship with the CEO by that stage, and felt quite familiar and comfortable with board processes I had learned over those years. And so it was a terrific honor to be nominated and I was very happy to take on that. And we had a terrific bunch of people on the board, but have a great CEO, which was, of course, made my job a lot easier. But I

took that responsibility seriously. And it was really important for me to be able to facilitate board meetings that were inclusive, that were lively, that, you know, we looked at making informed decisions, making sure we looked at all due diligence processes. So it was a really interesting and challenging opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 9:30

Hearing about your role in facilitating those board meetings. And we know we've all been to whether its board meetings or other meetings, where the chair of the board or the chair of that meeting is fantastic and sometimes not so fantastic. So what do you think is the secret to being a great chair and ensuring that you do have those inclusive and well informed decision making meetings?

Fiona Williams 9:53

Can me being an effective chair was firstly having a good lot of people. Education with the CEO, so I understood where he was coming from what his objectives were, then being able to be that mediator, if you like, in between the CEO and the board, but then, you know, in terms of the board meetings, to me, I really took on that role of facilitator. So at board meetings, being very aware of where the discussion was going, perhaps with people who hadn't contributed to the discussion and encouraging, you know, whether they had some thoughts that they'd like to put forward and facilitating those conversations and allowing every everyone's opinions and ideas to be presented at the board meeting in a very respectful way, but then being able to draw the focus. Okay, we now need to make a decision around this, summarizing what the key points were, then as a chaired and I suppose, presenting a decision or motion and ensuring that everyone was happy with that before we progress. So if I felt that there were still issues that, you know, there were some underlying issues or people weren't completely happy, I would continue to make sure that we really had reached an agreement. And if some people, you know, it was a different opinion, why we felt in this case, that, you know, wasn't the best interest that we made that decision. So, to me, those types of facilitation skills were important to ensure that it was an inclusive board meeting and people were happy with the decision we were making.

Helga Svendsen 11:31

I hear from other chairs. And indeed, there's been a conversation around this, I think, in the Facebook group that take a board Facebook group, about the role of the chair is obviously very different to being a board member. And sometimes that means you don't get to participate in the conversation in the same way as you would if you are a member of the board. Did you find that and if so, how did you manage the transition?

Fiona Williams 11:53

Yes, absolutely. That is true, because I think because you're taking on that facilitation role more. You are not able to sort of sit back as much and think about, you know, your contribution or, and then just to have that opportunity presented as much. So yes, that is true. I think the way I suppose I looked at that transition was to before board meetings to have a think about perhaps where I would sit on a particular issue or what was the key thing I felt was important to get across. So, when introducing the next agenda item, I may take that opportunity to say just very briefly and perhaps where my thoughts were, and now open up the discussion from there. So that's absolutely true. You are perhaps not able to contribute in the same way as a board member as Chair

Helga Svendsen 12:46

When you stepped down from the Chair again, I know one of the conversations in the take on board Facebook group recently has been around what's the right way to exit as a Chair, how do you then do your succession planning to hand over to the next person, do you stay on the board and support them? Do you move off the board and just let them have their place? How did your transition work? And what are your views around how a good transition can move when you're moving out of the Chair role?

Fiona Williams 13:13

We had a succession planning subcommittee, and that was for obviously recruitment of new board members as well as looking at taking on co chair and chair positions within the board, including Treasurer as well, knowing that my maximum term was coming up about a year before and we started discussing who might in the board be an appropriate chair. It was not incredibly formal process, if you like it, you know, between myself and the coaches. We'd be having that discussion, obviously looking at the coaches themselves and whether they were interested in taking on the chair role, who else might be approached to discuss that so it was considered as to who might be an appropriate chair once we nominated and elected a new chair I spent some time providing some hand over like more, again, an informal coffee chat about where I found that there were strengths and where I found challenges or what I'd learned lessons learned from that experience. So I think that that transition is really important. And again, it doesn't have to be incredibly resource intensive, or regardless of whether you're small or large boards, I think some of these processes can be really easily put in place, but they make a huge difference. So with thinking to you know, one of the things that I would have also said as a chair, and we were talking about going from that board member to a chair role as a facilitator, one of the other key roles I think of a chair is to ask the questions as well perhaps that haven't been asked during the discussion. So perhaps being able to sit back and think where the discussions gone, and as a chair, perhaps taking that role of being able to ask the CEO or to the board, as a whole, perhaps the question that needs to be asked that will stimulate a certain conversation or get people thinking about a particular issue that's important to consider. You know,

Helga Svendsen 15:11

it's kind of like the whole life cycle, how you got onto the board of Bethany, became the chair and then exited. And then of course, you joined the board of what was then Otways Health. Tell us that story and how you joined to that board.

Fiona Williams 15:26

Once I finished at Bethany, I was interested in taking on another board rather than it had been a really rewarding experience being part of business. I was very hooked and really enjoyed that governance role in organizations and going back again, to my original most factor of being on boards was around that working with community social justice issues. So I was still very interested in being on a board that looked at providing services community and I lived down on the south coast and I was came to be on a local board. So after a while I became aware of the recruitment period with DHHS, for health boards DHHS. Can you tell us what that is? Oh, sorry, Department of Health and Human Services. Whilst I don't have a health background? For me, I felt well not I've been on the Bethany board. I've learned a lot from that I was chair. I've also worked in an area or child safe organizational practice for a long time, right to children of young people to access services. So you know, I'm an advocate for children and young people's rights. So I thought all these I can bring to the health services area. And so I thought, right, yes, I'm going to apply for a health board. And also I was really keen to contribute to a regional health board because to me, they're really unique needs and qualities of regional health services and hospitals and I was keen to be able to contribute at that level as well. So I went through the recruitment process with the department was originally applying to the lawn hospital board but the department felt would be really well suited to Otway Health Board, which is down in Apollo Bay.

Helga Svendsen 17:23

The irony is, I think that in one of the issues that the your board dealt with, you actually went through a merger process with Lorne in the end.

Fiona Williams 17:31

Yes, which was really interesting. So just as I joined the Otway Health Board, discussions had been under foot to look at, I suppose sustainability planning, really Apollo, but it's a small rural regional community have a fantastic local hospital there. It's a multi purpose service, which means that it's both acute hospital care as well as providing kids services. So provided a really important to service to the local community. And the issues, I suppose with many regional hospitals is ensuring that you can retain GP's for instance, you're looking at issues around, many people being quite living quite remotely and isolated from the hospital. So looking at accessibility issues, obviously down that way, you've got influx of tourists over the summer periods. So, you know, having to make sure there was enough staff available. So a whole range of issues and, and really, that poses challenges around

sustainability. So, discussions had begun around amalgamation to ensure that really, both Lorne and Apollo Bay could provide quality health services, diversify their services, and really work towards good health and well being outcomes for both communities. So ironically, even though I'd really applied for Lorne, we amalgamated with the Lorne hospital and we became the Great Ocean Road health. So that's been interesting. So two boards coming together, the CEO was the same, the same CEO between both hospitals. So that obviously made the transition a bit easier. It's been a really interesting process. And it's really exciting now that we're able, through this amalgamation to offer so many more services and look at some fantastic sustainability strategies,

Helga Svendsen 19:28

The boards coming together. Can you talk us through what's happened there?

Fiona Williams 19:32

We were asked, did we want to remain on the new board of Great Ocean Road health? And yes, most people did. So we've come together, we had a couple of really important strategic planning days that were externally facilitated, which I think was important when you've got two boards coming together and people that feel very committed to their local communities. So it was great to be able to come together and hear the priorities and of both communities and work together as to how we can really, you know, join forces and be able to provide the best outcomes for both communities. And as you could imagine, to, you know, the transition period was, it was important that we had good communication with the local community. So for Apollo Bay, the local hospital is very important. And we needed to ensure that we had acknowledged the concerns of the local community concerned that they would might lose their hospital and reassure them that that was not happening, and how this amalgamation was going to work in the best interest about communities. So it's been a fascinating process. And I think, you know, I'm really looking forward to how we go, you know, in the next few years and making sure that the community really comes along with us and we are ensuring that we are meeting their needs and listening to them. And so the community advisory committees of both hospitals have remained separate. So I'm still on just the Apollo Community Advisory Committee. And that's a great opportunity to sit with community, hear their concerns, hear their ideas, and have that translated up to the board.

Helga Svendsen 21:13

No, I'm gonna have to come back to you, I think and have another full conversation about the merger and some of the challenges in there. There might even be a little kind of a podcast series, I think around merges or some of the other challenges that organizations face, I suspect will be some great stories in there that you might be able to share with us. But from today's conversation, you've shared with us a lot around getting on board and embed being an effective chair and, you know, leveraging some of that experience, what are the some of the main points that you want people to take away from today's conversation?

Fiona Williams 21:45

I think some of the main points are that you certainly don't feel that if you haven't had sort of leadership management or governance experience perhaps in your career that does that that does not negate against you applying for a board. position, think about both your the skills you've acquired during your career but also to me your values and what you can bring your commitment to the issue that you're passionate about, and that you can bring to the board as well, which I think is incredibly important because that commitment then really provides a fantastic springboard to make a real contribution to a board. I think also from you know, looking at health boards, being a someone who did not have a health background was not a deterrent. When I applied to the Otway Health Board, they were really came to hear about my experience in the child protection, the child rights issues, and obviously my experience on previous board. So we tend to think perhaps just lawyers and accountants and that is boards are really effective when you have a diverse range of skills, backgrounds and experiences. So I really encourage people to apply for boards. And think about also finally our regional boards because it's a wonderful way to work on a board that has a really close connection with community. And whilst obviously you need local people on those boards, I'm two hours away from Apollo Bay. We do have some members from Melbourne. So again, I think you know, looking at, you don't need to feel that you have to be located right in in that community to feel you still make a contribution.

Helga Svendsen 23:32

I could not agree more certainly diversity on boards, any board and health boards included is incredibly important. And here in Victoria and listening to this, the health boards will be advertising for their board directors very soon that might even be by the time this goes to air. So if it is I'll put a link in the show notes. And if not, make sure you register for the get on board website, which I'll definitely put a link in the show notes and they will tell you when the applications open, which are expected to be in early November. Fiona, do you have a resource that you'd like to share with people?

Fiona Williams 24:06

Well, from my recent experience, the best resource that I found joining an Health Board not having been on a hospital before, was the courses that are offered by the Department of Health and Human Services. They offer a number of seminars, workshops, on a range of issues, governance issues for board members, particularly issues around clinical governance, which is incredibly important to understand around your duties and obligations, particularly around this state legislation and requirements. So a new policy that's coming from the government, for instance, the voluntary assisted dying legislation that recently was enacted, so it's, I would really encourage new board members to attend those courses offered by the department, talk to your board, if you you know, see something coming up and they haven't let you know Certainly talk to the chair and because

they're often really happy to do enable you to get to these courses, and I found them very, very worthwhile.

Helga Svendsen 25:10

Again, I echo that entirely the programs through the Department of Human Services and health have been very helpful to me in my role also, as a director of one of the other health services. For people that are listening, just some encouragement being on a health board is an amazing thing to do. They are incredible services for our community. And whether it's a regional service or one of the metro, we really encourage you to apply. It's a fantastic thing to do. Fiona, thank you so much for your time today. It has been fabulous to have this conversation and I know people will get an enormous amount out of it. And also for your presentation yesterday, one of my breakfast. So thank you so much for your time, I appreciate it.

Fiona Williams 25:47

No problem. So it's been a pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity.