



Take on Board

Transcript – Sheena Watt

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast I'm speaking with Sheena Watt about how to get on a board and about cultural isolation in the boardroom. Firstly, let me tell you a little bit about Sheena, a proud Yorta Yorta woman, Sheena Watt is a board member of Vic Health, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Progressive Public Health Australia, the Victorian Council of Social Services or otherwise known as VCOSS, and Women's Health Victoria. She's also the executive manager for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy and programs at AFL SportsReady. Sheena was formerly on the Boards of the Queen Elizabeth Centre, The Centre for Australian Progress, 3KND (Koori Radio Melbourne), Eastweb fund, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance, ANTaR National. Shana What an amazing list and welcome to the take on board podcast.

Sheena Watt 0:49

Oh, thank you so much for having me here.

Helga Svendsen 0:51

So Sheena, before we get into the conversation, can you just tell us a little bit about the organizations that you're on the board of at the moment

Sheena Watt 0:59

I'm on four boards, it's, it keeps me really busy, but I'm immensely proud of the work and contribution that I'm able to make to these really important institutions. The Victorian Health Promotion Agency known all over, not only Victoria and the world as Vic health is really the a pioneer in health promotion and promotes good health and the prevention of chronic disease. That's a ministerial appointment and one that I'm a year into the Victorian council social services is a new one for me, up to about my third month, and that's the Peabody for social services in Victoria, with members all over this fine state. The other is progressive public health Australia. It's a gutsy little startup that works to advocate on public health issues that unfortunately, the sector can always advocate on themselves, but also press the barrier of some of the emerging public health issues in our community. And finally, my most recent one is women's health Victoria and I join that this week and was elected at the AGM at the 25th anniversary this very week, I was so very proud of that situation

Helga Svendsen 2:07

But congratulations to them and getting such a fine board member to the board.

Sheena Watt 2:11

Thank you. It's an incredibly important organization doing really good work. And I'm just thrilled

before I delve into some of those things. And I've already got a number of questions I want to delve into. But before we go there, you know, I'd love to learn a little bit more about you. Can you tell us what was your earliest experience of governance?

I never set out to do what I do in the boardroom, or even being a boardroom. I didn't grow up knowing what a boardroom was. I'm a kind of humble working class kid from Melbourne, spent a little bit of time in Brisbane and when I moved to Brisbane, I ended up getting involved locally, in some community efforts around Aboriginal cultural heritage. There was a site that was really significant to Aboriginal people locally, and they were looking for a youth voice. And I was asked to come along and be a youth representative on the board of terrible Aboriginal Corporation. They were the representative body for the Aboriginal people there. And so I joined as a youth representative and ended up on the board strangely at 15 years old, leading a, some works locally around the saving of a boring, it was something that sticks with me all these years later, and made me realize just what an impact you can have a board level in it. It kind of came from there, really. So that's my first memory. And so there is a sacred site in North Brisbane that's there because of some advocacy of some really good strong community members that I look up to and still admire to this day.

Helga Svendsen 3:53

And since then, you've obviously built a pretty impressive board portfolio over the years. There is a number that you've been on and a number that you're on now. So you've been on the board of VCOSS for a couple of months. You're about to join the board of women's health Victoria later this week, elected this week. So I'm wondering about your induction for VCOSS and how that worked and how you're joining of the board went?

It went remarkably smooth. I wasn't expecting it to be as welcoming and as warm as it was not that it was some big, scary, you know, staid institutional organization that does, you know, incredible advocacy and policy work and I was a little bit intimidated by the enormity of it, frankly, but making the CEO put together a really great program to make sure that I felt as welcome and I need to pay profound respects to the chair of the board, stellar. Have an office who has shown me really watch

good induction looks like she took the time out to reach out to me and we had a Great meeting where she talked about the history of the organization, what the direction looks like, what part I can play? What are the emerging challenges? What are some risks that you need to know about? How does the election work? What are some sticking points in the constitution and other things? And for me, that was exactly what I needed, as well as doing the standard sort of induction work around understanding the funding the finances, directors, duties and other sort of fundamentals. There was a real warmth to it that I hadn't received. Well, I had but in a very different way. There were two women now that I think have just got it so very, very right. Hmm.

You would hope so. I didn't organizational other alternative counseling, social services, but it is great to hear because sometimes organizations that should have it right. Don't have a quiet so right. So it sounds like an effective and warm and inclusive introduction to the organization and to your role.

Sheena Watt 5:56

And now in my first two meetings, I found the way the chair makes every effort to include me in the conversation makes every effort to ensure that my contribution is heard and valued has been something that I really appreciate it.

Helga Svendsen 6:10

So I'd be interested in exploring that concept of inclusion for you. Even when you described your first board, you know, you were the youth voice on the board. Yes, you're at the young person. You're a young woman, you're a young Aboriginal woman. What's been your experience of inclusiveness in the boardroom?

Sheena Watt 6:28

Well, you feel fairly included when you have senior Aboriginal elders and leadership, they're keeping an eye out for you and making sure that you're supported. But as you'll say, from some of my experiences, they're not all Aboriginal organization. So the isolation that I felt as a young person, it was tough. It was really tough. And it wasn't until I found my feet as a young person on the board of East web Fund, which is an incredible micro granting organization, sub funded of the Communities Foundation made up of all young people. And it was the first time that I found my voice as a young person equal to everybody else, you always have that filter that you put on before you speak. But for me, I didn't do that with the East Web Fund because I was just like everybody else in the room. And I felt like I was in a room of equals, in my youth, and it gave me some of the confidence that I'm now able to carry on into some of my other appointments. So I think the smooth fun for that. There's a little bit that I've learned from just about all of them was on a board with incredible Aboriginal women in the national Aboriginal Toronto women's alliance that helped me find my voice as an Aboriginal woman. I was on the Center for Australian progress, where I could be proudly progressive

and care about social change. And it be okay, because everybody else was there too. And now, I will All of those experiences now into the boards that I do. So I can be a younger person in the boardroom, even still, to this day, I can be a woman, an Aboriginal woman, and also somebody who cares deeply about my community and effecting change through advocacy and social movements. And I've been able to do all of that by finding my feet in a boardroom of those organizations and now can deliver messages about all of those things in all the different spaces I find myself in.

Helga Svendsen 8:32

In finding your feet through those experiences through all of those boards that knows different organizations. Is there any particular examples or situations that you are in in those that you can tell us about that give us a bit of a flavor of how you found your feet?

Sheena Watt 8:46

I often felt like I was kind of called on to be the voice of that particular group through all of those. Whether that was be the voice of the young people of Women or Victorian or whatever it was, and I think about, okay, I'm pretty strong now in knowing how to be the voice on the things that I know about. And I went, what's next for me? And I feel like I'd kind of gotten to the end of the road in terms of, you know, my identity and what I could represent in the boardroom. And it wasn't until I joined the board of the Queen Elizabeth center. And I'd like to acknowledge Sandy Bell, one of the previous podcast interview is a wonderful woman. He's the chair that I found how to make my voice heard on issues that aren't me that I don't have a lived experience of and I don't particularly know all the ins and outs of like I did for some of those other organizations. And the Queen Elizabeth centers and early parenting center, it's a hospital it works with children and vulnerable Situations right across our stage. And often it was sharing stories about motherhood. And so I sat in a boardroom, with people sharing stories about motherhood, and I'm not a mother. And I thought to myself, well, I'm not going to isolate myself from the conversation, I've got something to contribute. And so, for me, it was like the next natural progression from this was to be somebody who could speak up not just with authority on things that I had a lived experience on, but things that I didn't, but I knew about nonetheless. And so that's where I found my voice on things that I didn't have a lived experience of. And whilst every board meeting had somebody reflecting on their experiences of parenthood, I didn't have that, but I still found my voice in that boardroom and the lesson that was a really important lesson for me that now I apply just about all the time.

Helga Svendsen 10:56

What was it about that board? And what was it about that it spirits that allowed you to find that voice?

Sheena Watt 11:03

There are others I think was particularly helpful. There, women in the boardroom that couldn't kind of reflect on the challenges of being a mother in the first four years. They were people without children. And there were people that just knew that things had to be better, and that we were part of the mix of making things better. And so, for me, I think it was having fellow travelers shared experiences of not being someone with lived experience. And it was sort of almost a first for me, I must confess, because I had previously been a radio listener, or an Aboriginal woman or someone that cared about reconciliation or someone in the social movements. But for the Queen Elizabeth center, I wasn't someone that had ever used a service had anticipated using a service or really knew all that much about it. So it required me to dig deeper to make my contributions felt so challenging space to me. And I've learned a lot on reflection from that experience.

Helga Svendsen 12:09

So I know that you've also you've been on a range of health boards, health committees, and you've dug deep also in building your knowledge and expertise around clinical governance. Yes. Tell us about that. And that story and what, how that started and why you did that?

Sheena Watt 12:24

I was the other in the boardroom. And that was okay. I was a person with that lived experience. And that meant that I had to find my contribution in some meaningful way. And it wasn't enough for me to just be the Aboriginal person on the board or the woman on the board or the young person on the board. Because frankly, that wasn't going to get me through. This was a tough organization working with vulnerable young people and, and their families. So I thought about where can I make my contribution felt? Where can I add to The improvement of services for our children in this stage and I ended up thinking about what was going on in the world of health. And I looked outside of my own bubble, and did a bit of an environmental scan and seeing that there were some emerging challenges in the world of quality standards and clinical governance. And that would be a real focus for the boardroom of health organizations moving here on in, but it's not something that was awash with heaps of professionals. You know, one goes to clinical governance school, there is no Bachelor of clinical governance. So for me, I thought, well, this is one of those spaces that I could get into and I could learn a little bit about and I could apply myself and find this to be my level of difference in a health board. And so from that I got onto the clinical Governance Committee there at the Queen Elizabeth center. Was also on the clinical Governance Committee of Breast Screen Victoria, also on the clinical Governance Committee of Merri Health now, and I just have found that to be a really good way of expanding my knowledge and getting experience as well through subcommittee structure, so that when it does finally come to making a decision about joining a board, I can come into it from a period of expertise about a particular area of the business. So for me, it's been a good pathway into the boardroom as well.

Helga Svendsen 14:31

So there's two parts of that I'd like to explore a bit more. Firstly, you said you did a bit of an environmental scan to work out that clinical governance. I mean, you didn't know that was the answer you started but to work out what the big issues were, what were the sorts of things you did there in your environmental scan? What are some of the just practical things because it's such a great thing to do? And I'm not sure many people do so hearing your experience would be really useful.

Sheena Watt 14:53

Well, I looked at what were the things that industry organizations around boards are looking at what are they exploring You know, what is the magazines talking about? So I had a colleague who had a subscription to company directors magazine, and I would read that all the time and see what articles were being written. I looked at what stories were coming out in the health space, particular to a boardroom setting. I also explored through having some meetings with some colleagues already on boards. And finally, I looked at the media, and what was the media saying about health? When I put all this together, I got for me a clear picture. I knew what I couldn't do. I wasn't going to magic up and conjure up a law degree. I wasn't going to conjure up a medical degree so that I could become the expert lawyer in the boardroom or the expert, medical practitioner, but I could work my way around becoming a contributor to the clinical governance environment.

Helga Svendsen 15:52

Fabulous. And again, I know I mentioned this on last week's podcast, but of course the Victorian Government is very soon if they haven't already opened applications for the Victorian health services for their boards. And what you've just described is such a fantastic way for people to be able to do their own research around a health board if they're not a health person. So looking at the journals, looking at the media, talking to people involved in those things. It is it's a beautiful template. So thank you for sharing. You're welcome. You also said that, you know, you got on these committees of Merri health, Queen Elizabeth center, and so on today on the clinical governance or quality committees. And I think you also mentioned you just did some self learning about that. What did that look like for you?

Sheena Watt 16:32

Part of the exploring was to discover where the information was about clinical governance. So after I did that sort of environmental scan piece, I worked out, where were the stories being held, where were the information being shared, and how can I get my hands on it? So for me, it was that there was a big investigation happening in Victoria. There was a report coming out that really outlined the future steps for clinical governance in Victoria in a health services setting, and I grabbed that with both hands, and read it quite ferociously. And from that I was able to understand broadly, what

were the issues? What were the next steps? And what does the reform environment look like in clinical governance as well as understanding some of the service standards that we have around health services and working in a peak body in health also helped and having worked into three health related organizations was particularly helpful.

Helga Svendsen 17:29

I know, you've talked about the credibility gap and how you manage that in the boardroom. Can you talk to us about what that means for you and how you work with that?

Sheena Watt 17:37

It's quite an extraordinary thing to be 30 something year old on some of these boards, it's not common. So I come in feeling the weight of expectations about how is it that this 30 something is in the boardroom? And then I'm the 30 something woman and then I'm the 30 something Aboriginal woman and then I'm the 30 something Aboriginal woman without a law degree or that's not a doctor or whatever. So I carry all of this on my shoulders and somehow still found myself in the boardroom, which for me on reflection is quite extraordinary. Considering my very, very humble beginnings, I then think about what is the gap, either real or perceived that I have. And I try to address some of that through formal training, and address some of that through experience. And then in a very practical way, I hope to address some of that through actual preparation in the boardroom, and I do try my very best to be prepared. I then really consider that it's such an enormous privilege to be a governor of an organization. And it's something that I do carry with me, and particularly these organizations that are about supporting the health and well being of Victorians is something that stays with me all the time. I'm not there at some token projects, I'm really there to govern an organization that hires many, many people, many people's day jobs, their livelihoods, their families, livelihoods rest on the decisions that we make in the boardroom. And so, I need to sometimes, like get over my Sage failings, that's not always easy, but I do try my very best. I also think to myself, well, yes, I have a role to play in overcoming what I perceived to be some credibility gaps I feel that I might have in the boardroom. But then it's not just on me. It's also that others have a role to play because the board as a whole made a decision about me being there. And all the minister made a decision about me being there as in the case of my ministerial appointments. And so by rights and by decision I'm meant to be there. And so the role of all of us is to support each other to be the very best and most productive board we can be for the good of the organization. So I think that's the message is that it's not just on the person that's a little bit different to overcome all the challenges. It's also on the organization, it's on the fellow board members to think about how they too, can work with people that might have gotten to a boardroom and a whole different path to the ordinary steps that very many take to get there.

Helga Svendsen 20:35

I could not agree more about supporting each other. We're board we're actually a collegiate organization, I guess we work together. Can you tell us about a time when either you've really felt that support of others or, or and or when you've given that support to others?

Sheena Watt 20:52

I want to come up with 1000 examples but one is that boards are now being asked more and more, they take a leadership role and reconciliation in the boardroom reconciliation in their organizations, and with them to pay their part in closing the gap for health organizations that have a very strict way of doing things. This is a new bit of work. And I found that being an ally in the boardroom to non Aboriginal people that are for the sometimes for the very first time venturing into the world of Aboriginal Affairs, it's sometimes can be a little bit big and a little bit scary. And ally ship can go both ways. I think that's the message and I went to a conference recently and they said, Sometimes I'm just too scared to even ask because if I get it wrong, I get it wrong. And then everyone knows that I got it wrong. So I've just shy away from doing anything at all about it. But now, it's in the boardroom. It's on the papers, and I've got to make my mark. Make my position felt on this issue and I just don't have a clue where to start. So being almost like an ally for them has been good because sometimes they've been an ally for me. It can go that way. Or sometimes it's a favor that you pay forward and comes back to you at some other point in time. I am very soon to launch the first Reconciliation Action Plan for the Queen Elizabeth center, something that I worked on for an organization that's been around over 100 years. That's a really big deal. This is an organization that has a history with children and Aboriginal children in our state. And it took some tough conversations in the boardroom about the role that they played, and particularly amongst families and amongst women, and what was their contribution to the stolen generations. And for someone with a family history and the stolen generations, this was a very challenging time for me. So not only was I supported My fellow board members in what was a very confronting board conversation. It was also right and just and I was also going through my own emotions about being involved in an organization that had this history. But in the end, we came to a, you know, a joint position about fighting for the future of children, and the recognition that the removal of Aboriginal children in this stage is just too high. And that we all have a part to play in it, particularly this organization, and we need to step up and acknowledge past and make some firm commitments for our part in the future. So that for me was something that I'm enormously proud of. I can't wait to speak at the AGM in two weeks time, and let them know about just how enormously proud I am of them for taking these very, very brave step. So yeah.

Helga Svendsen 24:00

What a beautiful example around that. Yeah, co support in a way and allyship. Maybe we need a Bachelor of Allyship?

Sheena Watt 24:08

I've been asked that more than once I must confess.

Helga Svendsen 24:13

So Sheena, we've talked about a whole range of things, you know, you coming into boards, your role in the boardroom, finding your voice in the boardroom, allyship a whole range of things. What are the key points you want people to take away from today's conversation?

Sheena Watt 24:27

I think my three messages really for people are one that allyship in the boardroom is it remarkably important? And it starts from the very first meeting, maybe even before that, as I've discovered at my very first meeting recently, and secondly, is that you need to find your value beyond being another beyond being a young person or beyond being a woman or beyond being an Aboriginal person. You have so much more to contribute, then your identity, you have knowledge and skills, attributes and contributions that are very, very powerful. But beyond that you have obligations as a board member, and just there is no exemptions under ASIC for board members not doing their duties because I'm Aboriginal, that is not the case. So just as I am expected to understand how to read the financials, I'm also expected how to, you know, understand risks and all the rest. It's not a free pass from your duties as a director. And that is something that I think is really important to share that some people said put their hand up in the air and say, well, we're at the financials. Now, that's not my bit. I'll leave that to the finance guy. We're looking at risk. That's not my bit. I'll leave that to the lawyers or that committee. We all have an obligation and for me, it's something that I take really seriously Because for me to get my next board appointment I need to do right by these board appointments. And I'm not always saying that I'm looking ahead but doing my duties is important. And it sets you up for a really important career in the boardroom. And I suppose My third tip is about really the rest of my fellow board members. And now I'm on four boards and on each of those on the on the Aboriginal person. So I have somewhere in the tune of about 40 other board members that I see every month, none of which are Aboriginal, but they all have their own struggles with working with Aboriginal subject matter. And I want to say that allyship works both ways, but that you to have an obligation to reflect on the things that you think about. The other people in the boardroom and really challenge your biases, because just as I sometimes many years ago, so the accountant guy in the boardroom and went, yeah, that's just the accounting guy. I know he'll only speak out when it comes to the financials. That was a biases that I held. And I've since been corrected by some very active, very engaged, very interested and profoundly passionate board members that happen to also be CPA's I to think that others may have biases about me or about other women or about other young people about Aboriginal people in the boardroom. And I say to them, that it's a reflection in your you know, your journey that you need to do to look at yourself and understand where that we're all in this together and that we come to the boardroom with the shame vision for safe to thriving, stable, productive and solvent organizations.

Helga Svendsen 28:06

Oh, thank you Sheena, thank you so much for sharing your story and for sharing your governance wisdom. I think there's plenty in there for all of us to think about and to learn from. So thank you for being with us here today at take on board.

Sheena Watt 28:19

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.