



Take on Board

Transcript – Kellie O'Callaghan

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Kellie O'Callaghan about governance challenges and one of her passions. Putting consumers at the heart of governance and boards engaging with community stakeholders will also touch on the importance of boards feeling uncomfortable and embracing disruptors and non traditional leaders. First, let me tell you a little bit about Kellie Kellie is recognized for her strong leadership in health community services and governance. She's a well respected community leader and influencer with a passion for health, consumer and community engagement. Kellie served for many years as the chair of Regional Health Service board is a long serving elected counselor and former mayor and has served on a range of state boards and committees. Welcome to the take on board podcast Kellie.

Kellie O'Callaghan 0:44

Kellie, a great to be talking to you once again,

Helga Svendsen 0:47

Kellie, before we talk about governance challenges today, we've heard your official bio, but I know there's so much more to you. So can you just tell me a little more about you?

Kellie O'Callaghan 0:56

Absolutely. I'm a governance geek. I love this stuff. I like being in boards around boards, talking about boards, and problem solving with boards, which is what I do, most of the time at the moment. Most of the work that I do in and about with a range of boards and directors is around problem solving. So when things get to that pointy end of difficulty, when boards have tried to work through some of their problem solving mechanisms, and it's just got that little bit too difficult. And also when some of their engagement with their stakeholders, whether it be the consumers or the broader networks have broken down, and they really need to reengage and, and find ways through some difficult challenges. I find that that's the point where you really do get a level of insight to the structural capacity of boards in themselves, but also individual directors and some of these strings. So for me, I love all of the board related governance activity, I do enjoy having the opportunity to look at the differences between appointed and elected representatives in terms of governance. So I sit across both of those areas and enjoy the differences that that presents, some of them being a little more forward facing and, I guess, disruptive in a number of the ways they see in relation to

governance. But for me, I think the role of boards and the role of governance in providing clear decision making frameworks are exceptionally high standards of compliance, risk oversight, but also some great ways to engage directly with communities and stakeholders around how organizations work is really where I sit in terms of the stuff that I do. What I do also enjoy immensely is working in rural and regional communities and trying to dig down a bit and find, I guess what I described as non traditional leaders in relation to governance, try to draw out those people who've got exceptional skills and exceptional level of awareness in terms of what their communities and their organizations may need because they may already been part of organizations and really bring them more formally into a governance setting and create some pathways for them as well better hang out in a regional space. have grown up here.

Helga Svendsen 3:30

You are a Gippslander, right?

Kellie O'Callaghan 3:32

I am a proud Gippslander. Tell us what you love about Gippsland. What I love about Gippsland I think I love the connection to community and I've had a lot of conversations, particularly with our local Aboriginal elders around the work that we do. I had the great privilege of growing up in proximity to community based organizations but also in the primary school I was within where there was a signal A level of interaction between our broader communities and our regional elders. The very early had a very clear understanding of the importance of connection to country and community and what that meant. What I know now as an adult and still working with our local elder community is that was informing all of my understanding around the importance of connection and intergenerational connectivity within communities more broadly. And having a very firmly entrenched sense of responsibility and accountability, in form informs your practice in what you do and how you operate and interact with people around you. So I think that's probably reflected in where I've ended up in terms of work and in terms of staying within Gippsland and trying to build a good solid foundation of decision making practice and opportunity in the governance space across our region. But it's a really good launching off space to be embedded within communities that I know full will hold me to a level of accountability on a daily basis, whether or not I asked for that opinion that there is something about the connected to communities and knowing that you'll have that level of responsibility. But the other thing I did learn and this was particularly important, and we'll talk about it a bit more when we talk about, I guess health boards and consumers is when I was initially unwell about 18 years ago, I have re-order immune disease called weakness, granuloma traces of the same autoimmune disease that Mark Colvin for those who are familiar with ABC Mark Coleman. He passed away in recent years, he also had weakness and then had a breast cancer diagnosis about now six years ago and that great level of what I always saw as accountability and responsibility community also served to wrap around me in a very solid way to provide a level of care and support and active encouragement that I had within that community. So there's this really lovely balance between being accountable in a leadership role and in a governance context. But also knowing that having driven a broad range of that work within a community in a regional city that comes back to support

you in terms of your work within community, and when things go wrong for you that it's there to represent you as well. So I'm pretty lucky to be living in Gippsland.

Helga Svendsen 6:37

And it's such a beautiful example of how engagement is that two way street?

Kellie O'Callaghan 6:41

Absolutely. And I think one of the things that we often don't really understand in relation to boards because there's always a misconception that boards are unattainable. They're hard to reach this something that I misunderstood. There's something very, almost not clear, we talked a lot about transparency. But then when you ask someone what a board does, if they don't have that immediate exposure to it, they can find it very difficult to explain it. For me about breaking down those barriers is also about having a level of engagement directly with your stakeholders and your communities to the point where they do have access to understanding the ins and outs of how you make decisions while you're making them and what the impacts are going to be. So that you can truly inform your own practice in both ways. You can inform community about what you're doing, but they have a direct opportunity to be engaged with you in governance, as a board, either appointed or elected.

Helga Svendsen 7:41

What was your first board and how did you get involved in that first board?

Kellie O'Callaghan 7:46

I was one of the heads many people describe these kinds of things, you wander into roles, not expecting that that's where you're going to be so like many people I'd been on not for profit organization. committees from time to time I've been on the preschool committee, I've done those sorts of things, and enjoyed it. I never really saw much of it as being a pathway to anything else. I then had my initial consumer experience and found myself engaged with our local health service. And through that engagement as a patient was approached to be part of the community advisory committee that existed in that service, which they really first kicked off, you know, we're talking quite some time back then. So my initial diagnosis was now about eight years ago. But there's that I guess it was a political imperative around having more of a focus on health consumers, particularly in health boards, around engagement. And as time progressed, there was a direct desire on the part of boards and the minister's office at the time to have helped consumer representation sitting on boards. So as that body of work was coming on board, I don't know that there was a lot of clarity around what that would mean and what level of support that would require. But I think I was lucky to be in that initial cohort that came in. So for a lot of boards, where they were seven seats at the table, they increased them to April nine. And I went in to one of those spots at Latrobe regional

setting there for a while and was very much the rookie on the board was very, very fortunate to have exceptional mentors, and very generous and extremely patient, people. And anyone who knows me knows that I run hard and fast. So I'm desperate to get in my change, make it all happen immediately. And I'd say always probably even more enthusiastic and inspired but probably a little less informed when I started in that space but allowed me to fail safely. And I think that's something that I talked about quite a bit when working with boards and directors is I had a lot of people around me who led me to build trust quite rapidly, who actively encouraged me to ask questions. And I one of the really practical things for boards is understanding how to be able to do that for new directors coming in and said in my first board meeting, I remember sitting there just watching and watching the world go by and thinking, great, this is terrifying. Not really sure how I'm going to hold my own in this space. There's a lot of really smart people sitting around the table, and I'm not really sure what I bring to this, I couldn't quite see the fit. But by the end of the meeting, one of my mentors in the room and it was Keith Hamilton, he was also one of our local members actively encouraging me to have a question, please ask a question. I'm like, Oh, no, it's gonna be a silly question. And he spent quite a bit of time engaging with me about the importance of just getting your skills up and getting to that space where, irrespective of what the question was that I was going to bring to the table, whether it be that meeting or another one That I really did need to start building that muscle around, being confident in the space and confident in engaging and often on boards will talk about the skill set the board members bring, whether it's legal, whether it's financial, whether it's more of a community engagement perspective, little something more compliance and risk focused. We often forget that there are a range of other skills that you need to be able to exercise around the table to engage with that cohort. And it's not simple. So I was really very, very fortunate that that room had a significant level of awareness and preparedness to bring on someone who was fairly obvious to everyone. This is my first time sitting around the board table in a substantive way and quite actively encouraged that. What's your question today? What's your next question?

Helga Svendsen 11:54

And I think it's always think it's interesting that those new people around the board table, whether it's new to that board or New to the board table all together. That newness really brings a different perspective. So can bring incredible value to that board table because you're new to the boardroom or new to that boardroom and you see things differently. So it can never be undervalued. I think that newness, it's actually a real strength, sometimes in the boardroom rather than a perceived weakness.

Kellie O'Callaghan 12:20

And one of the difficulties I think boards do find at the moment, and it can be very challenging to get to that very safe landing space where boards can embrace that is that level of discomfort and the challenge around being comfortable with being uncomfortable. I've set in a number of boards, goodness knows I probably sit in a few now where it is quite clear, in a number of instances that I may have to preface just to get people to a level of comfort that I know what I'm presenting them with is something they're going to feel uncomfortable with. So it's almost like directly engaging with

the conversation around and understanding that I know what I'm about to say to you is going to give you a moment of pause, I know what I'm suggesting is going to have a level of reaction potentially is going to feel a little disruptive is not going to sit comfortably. But we need to have this conversation. And that's hard when you're huge. But if someone who is new has a level of opportunity to create a by board, to have that conversation, or has some level of skill or awareness about how to preface that, or how to get themselves comfortably, knowing that they can ask it and feel uncomfortable and still walk away and it's okay, then that's important too. And that's a real challenge for boards. And there's a very distinct tension in board spaces around particularly disruptive and non traditional leaders. Feeling potentially ostracized by the group think of a very comfortable board set and not feeling they can go in there and just ask the disruptive question, but the the trick for any board, really is to understand that if you're not having those conversations in the board, someone else is having those conversations about you somewhere else, and it will come and bite you at some point. So you really got to get around those things that you feel least comfortable with. And find a way as a board to encourage them and if that means having someone in the room, you can literally slow the conversation and just say to everybody, you know what, I think we're feeling a little unsettled. It's okay, let's just keep going with it. Call it out. signposted as you go. It's really good trust building within boards, but for some, it can be challenging and difficult and it's exhausting for those who are the signposts along the way. And there's an important level of recognition that we need to give to getting around those disruptors and those engaged Do are persistently trying because you run the risk, they'll walk away if they feel they're the only one in the room that are putting the other sides of arguments or trying to bring in a different perspective to the group. So you've got to be able to hang in as a board cohort to be able to do that effectively.

Helga Svendsen 15:18

And you've been the chair of boards before and the things I'm hearing from you now about being upfront about being uncomfortable and encourage uncomfortableness. You know, I think if a board is always comfortable, they're probably not doing their job very well. So really encouraging and expecting it. What are some of the other ways that as the chair, you have really led that possibly diverse groups or diverse skills and experience or, you know, other voices to be heard and lead that group in that uncomfortableness? What are some other ways that you've used to make that happen?

Kellie O'Callaghan 15:53

I think sometimes what you do need to be prepared to do is get comfortable in the silence which is absolutely nerve wracking for directors a lot of the time can be completely unnerving for ci to let the room seat. I know the first few times I did it, it just felt terrifying. Because there's almost that anticipation of like, whenever we're now in a silence, I can see that this is eyes down, no one's going to look at me at this point. So you know, just being able to observe the room that there's a level of discomfort. And it's often around highly challenging issues. We're not talking about just doing your run through your basic board agenda. It's people usually pretty primed by the time you get into those spaces, and there's this challenge, but feeling comfortable to let the room just seat so that

there is an awareness that there is broadly around the table a level of discomfort, in itself is quite a skill, not filling the void and letting the group in themselves get naturally to a point of the next conversation. And that's really hard, particularly if you're a strong g Something I have to watch quite carefully because I can be very firm. And very direct, I run a tight meeting, usually because it quite heavy in terms of content. But I will be running through my mind at the same time, I need to back this away and allow for that conversation to happen. And let the board take that conversation where it needs to go and trust within myself that I can get that safely to where it needs to be in terms of a conclusion. That's difficult. Because it means you have to sit with the discomfort of not saying anything, and knowing that the rooms probably struggling with where to go next. But just let them take it day. And just keep that flow and keep everyone engaged and keep it moving. While you're processing enough of it to then wrap it up and find where that safe let you basically often think of it in a visual sense. There's a whole lot of stuff going around and you just letting that playing gliding. Just let it get into a safe landing, but don't Pull it up so hard that everyone's like, right, we're just going to shut down this conversation, I don't want to jump in. And just give some of those really gentle guiding opportunities within your board, particularly if you've got some more quiet members or some newer members to your board. I know this is uncomfortable. I know this is challenging. This is going to take some time. We don't need to resolve it today. But we need to have these conversations. So let's just keep working it through and bring that conversation forward. When it works well, it works beautifully. When it doesn't, you've also got to be able to call that too. So you do have to know and part of that just using your your board chair muscle to the point where you know that it automatically is the time where you need to intervene. They need to be safe spaces the conversations need to be such that you're not going to damage the capacity of the board to interact more robustly and vigorously with each other over time. You don't want to burn everybody in one conversation because you will never get another good one out of them again. So there will be times we need to intervene. It's okay, let's just take a break. And it can be a physical break for boards often is a real reluctance to just stop and take a break. Everyone just go for a walk from it, and it's come back and do it again. And it is something I've learned particularly in local government where things can get quite heated where the debate can be quite solid. I think one of my colleagues said to me, once GU your colon a German and I will and I'll call for a German even from outside of the chair, as a counselor sitting in that space. There's no point having Everyone sit in a tangle in a room for the sake of it being good sports for those watching. The decision making process is not going to be best informed by a struggling room of decision makers. So giving everyone a few minutes just to step it out and take some time back and get into a good friend rider. Bring those conversations back to the tables really important.

Helga Svendsen 19:58

Thinking about counseling I'm not sure if your council is one of them. But increasingly councils are webcasting the council meetings and or have the community there and then observing they are open meetings. How does that impact that? You know, that struggle for the sitting in a discomfort that struggle for the right decision? What's the impact there where you thought,

Kellie O'Callaghan 20:21

It's really interesting because we've gone to live stream. So live stream for us started in my middle term. So we gave it a good solid test run at that point. So we went straight to Facebook Live To start with, we've gone over to YouTube for a number of reasons. from a management perspective, it's much easier Facebook can be a little more unwieldy to utilize in that space. What I have noticed is that the number of people attending the meetings proper has reduced significantly.

Now that we are available on a cast and frame. But I think the awareness of the decision making because people can go back and check. So I can say at the 33 minutes of go and have a look, this is exactly what I said, people can actually go and check what it was like and also replay that conversation. There's also an opportunity to see the entirety of the room. And when you're sitting in a room proper in in a gallery, you can, I guess, get distracted by the other things going on around you. And when you're watching that, and you're watching the fullness of a room from a different perspective, the conversation itself actually captures your attention a little bit more than the visual. Whereas when you're in the room, the play of the room is probably a little bit more at the forefront. So we've got a full cranial CDs in any elected government space. your elected officials will play to the crowd, if they've got a big crowd if there's nobody there that won't bother. People are only ever going to try and do that. So those rules in a boardroom where everything's through the chair do apply in local government, but they tend to be less proactively managed. Because real the reality of the situation is is pretty popularly elected. So people are bringing matters that are of interest to their constituents into the room for debate, and they're wanting to make a bit of an impression. So it does change it a bit. What is really interesting for boards, and local government as well as the challenges around social media that that then brings to the fall, once you start engaging in whether it be a webcasting space, or you know, Facebook, Instagram, whatever it is, Twitter seems to be a real challenge, because of the pace that exists with it and how quickly conversations can turn. And I do know some organizations who stepped away from that space, because they don't feel they can manage it. I don't necessarily think that's wise, because I do strongly believe and we were just talking about it earlier. If you're not out there talking about it, someone's going to be talking about you anyway, you might as well be in the conversation. But I'm extremely comfortable in social media. So I engage as a board director, I engage as a chair of organizations. I engage As an elected official, and there really aren't a lot of conversations that are out of bounds, but I also apply the principles. And it's quite clearly indicated on all of my platforms, that if you're having a conversation you wouldn't be prepared to have in my lounge room that I wouldn't tolerate. If he was sitting in my lounge room, then don't expect to have it on my social media account. That took me a while to get to the point of being comfortable with excluding people from conversations, but now I don't worry about it at all. doesn't stop me having difficult conversations. But the tone and the level of respect that needs to exist within those conversations is a minimum standard for me. So getting organizations to the point where they feel comfortable around, having an authorizing environment around social media is really important. But the other thing too, is it's an engagement platform now that so many members of our community are using, if you're not out there engaging and you're still relying on paper based surveys and talking The people who walk through your front door, then 80% of your audience have just been lifted out of any of the community engagement and consultation. So getting boards, particularly to a space where they can engage proactively, whether it is by

webcasting, whether it is by having an Open Board Meeting right now, and they know whether it's about having your board directors directly engaging with it can be consumers of your services, it's just it's essential. Now, if you're bored, scared of it, acknowledge it, but then you need to get some support and being able to do it effectively and safely. Because goodness gracious, if you do it badly, you can end up in more of a tangle when then you had to start with but ignoring it and hoping it goes away, is a very naive position for a board to be in and it's stalking you whether you like it or not. It's going to just keep creeping up behind you. And there is nothing worse for board director. And I have this often when I'll go into services and I'm doing some work. with them. And I will tell them what I know is happening and what's been spoken about in relation to the service to their capacity, even in relation specifically to direct as individuals or as a group. And they are horrified because they don't know you're operating from a very vulnerable in any ill informed position. If you don't know what others are saying about you. You might not like it, but you need to know what it is, so that you can effectively engage with it. And social media really is one of the platforms you've got to get into whether you like it or not.

Helga Svendsen 25:34

If you are going to be an effective governor of an organization, whichever sort of organization that is if you don't know what your people are saying and what they need and want and desire, you're going to find that governance of the organization fairly challenging as well, I would say.

Kellie O'Callaghan 25:47

Absolutely. And the concept of leaning into those conversations, even if they are extremely difficult is important. Know your honor for you even in terms of facilitating those difficult conversations when you're in a room full of people. You know, the first thing to do is go to the heart of the difficulty of it, the easy stuff. That's the low hanging fruit we can all do that is quite a skill and technique which we can all learn, it's wonderful to see someone who thinks they couldn't do it, then be able to, to build that strength in their skill and do it well. But leaning into those really difficult conversations is important to doing that effectively in social media is essential, because it will get a run on rapidly. And I've had those moments I've prepared a post, I've sat there and thought, Oh, I don't want to put this out there. Because you know, it's going to start an avalanche. And I described it once to some boards that I was doing some work with. The first few times you do it and it's a contentious post or it's something that you want to put up. That doesn't work particularly well. You're literally going to feel like every one of those responses is someone standing at your front door trying to kick it in, get comfortable with it. What can you do, how can you engage, can't ignore it. A good example of one that I saw borrow and health coming off this recent ransomware attack incident around it and Francis diver and her crew have put together some content in an appropriately timed way, which I think is important as well, you've got to understand how that looks, and what that means in terms of what you put forward. But if anyone wants to have a look at, it's on their LinkedIn, I know certainly on facie, it's a good one to have a look at because it shows you a level of acknowledgement in terms of the organization. It gives enough context to demonstrate a willingness to see the challenges that's causing only for the stakeholder group or for the

organization. But it also ties in beautifully. staff is stakeholders and brings in the human factors of the conversation. So one of the great challenges often around services is not understanding that you're not a facility you've actually got in building In fact is and, and your staff cohorts and your broader networked community is part of the infrastructure that supports your organization. But the Barwon health response that went out in recent days is solid.

Helga Svendsen 28:14

I'll make sure I put a link to that in the in the show notes as well as a great, not the perfect, but a great example of how that can be done.

Kellie O'Callaghan 28:20

Yeah. And coming off the back of bad news as well. And there's often a real challenge for boards when something went wrong, I think was Heart foundation around some of their ads that they had and then had to come out to talk again about, we think we got that wrong. Acknowledging era is essential. And don't wait for someone else to do it. If you're someone who's engaged proactively in these spaces, and you're watching it happen and I often described as all when I'm watching a car crash. And I saw those ads roll out and photo quite this isn't going to enroll for anybody. And you can see it spiraling but then the pressure of them Market to point out what you've done wrong how you have mismanaged, branded, I guess triggered responses. And I think that was really clear in that particular campaign where there was a triggering of an emotive response about something that was too particularly sensitive to that you effort for good reason. It wasn't well, executed.

But then to try and pick it up, really just had to come straight out and say, You know what, we got this wrong. And thank you for telling us we got this wrong. No, no arguing the reasons why you did it. No one's all that interested in why you got to that point. No one wants to hear justification for why you made a bad decision. They want you to acknowledge it. They want you to acknowledge the impact of that decision upon them. But there's also a very strong sense of justice within communities and stakeholders that standing up for those people who they feel were harmed by what it was that you did, so they might not be feeling personally a fronted By the message but they are feeling the need to represent others who they don't feel like had a voice. If you don't engage in that and quickly acknowledge era, find a way to do that. But from a governance perspective, you then need to be able to sit as board and effectively do the autopsy on that. What was it and you need to sit in the discomfort of hearing that feedback. And for board if you want to do it in a quick Rapid Fire away and you don't have a sophisticated mechanism within your board. bring together all of that Facebook feedback, all of the commentary on Twitter, sit in the room, read it out loud to each other, just sit with it and let it soak in. Some of it is completely unsophisticated, and I acknowledge that. But that's still an unsophisticated conversation happening about you your service or your directorship. It's being held in the public domain. So you might as well hear it, and you might as well discuss it and work through what you would have liked it to look like and what it was Around

the gateways within your organization that got you to that space, how you then rectified it, and how you going to stop it happening again? How you going to do better next time? Exactly. Ah,

Helga Svendsen 31:13

Kellie, so much wonderful stuff in this conversation. So we've covered a whole range of things around engagement and communities and patients and embracing those disruptor. So I'm just wondering what are the main points you would want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Kellie O'Callaghan 31:31

I think one of the things is be very comfortable in discomfort, don't feel the great rush and I had someone said to me that either we're very friendly board and, and that's very comfortable. I'm okay and not feeling like I'm sitting in a room full of friends. Sometimes. You can be respectful, you can build trust. But it's not about being friends. You've got a job to do. And I do know I'm an outlier in that. I totally accept it. My level of responsibility and accountability far outweighs my need to be like, I'm okay with that. I've got moments where it feels terribly, terribly uncomfortable. But be okay with that discomfort if you don't have a level of self awareness so that you can at least engage in getting enough skills, build support, or mentoring opportunities in getting to a point of feeling really comfortable with it. When you're in moments of significant challenge in terms of issues, emerging problems, competitive relationships, just difficulty generally at a board level. When you feel within yourself that you need to pull back that's the point where your day to lightning, so do exactly the opposite to what you think you need to do. And get yourself enough support so that you can do it. Don't walk away. We've all had those moments where we're sitting on boards where it's difficult and you think it's just easy to walk away personally. Yes, but the ground Good is not served by the true leaders and disruptors walking away. So lean in, get enough support for yourself. So that you can do well and succeed because you need some wins. I think when you are challenging and questioning and providing feedback that is sometimes challenging for your colleagues, you still need to be able to get some wins. So make sure you're getting feedback, not only within your own group, which can be difficult to hear, but had some independent opportunities for feedback that really do give you some insight into how you're regarded and what you might find is that that body of information looks quite different to how you perceive yourself. So be very aware of those sorts of things and get some really solid resources that you can go back and reflect on if you find that your practices slipping because at the end of the day, really solid practices going to be informed by good work and willing formed work. And that needs to be informed by some good solid governance principles. So if you're a board that doesn't do a lot of professional development, doesn't really get a lot of opportunity to explore the way you're operating as a board, there's a bit of a challenge. So get some stuff in there. But be self aware, build a strong foundation for your principles of governance around good resourcing. Keep learning. And if you really, really are struggling, reach out, get some support, even encourage someone to come and do some observations with your board and give you some really solid feedback which I've done a few times. I love it, because I love a board who trust enough to bring in, as I said once bringing Darth Vader to sit there and give them some feedback. But it's a

really good way to build trust within the room to have someone who can then walk away and not have to sit immersed within the culture of your board and give you some feedback as well.

Helga Svendsen 34:58

And again, like a newcomer, they see That those that have been involved for a while, don't say so. It's a great way of getting that awareness. Our Kellie that is just fantastic. Thank you so much for joining me for this conversation today. I know the take on board community, you're going to get an enormous amount out of hearing your pearls of wisdom. Thank you for being with me here today.

Kellie O'Callaghan 35:19

Absolute pleasure to talk with you. Helga, we could talk for days could definitely talk for days. Thanks for the opportunity. Great to talk to you.