

Michelle Shepherd - PODCAST .mp3

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SPEAKERS

Helga Svendsen, Michelle Shepherd

H Helga Svendsen 00:00
Today on the Take on Board, I'll be speaking with Michelle Shepherd about what it takes to get on a board. Let me tell you a little bit about Michelle. Michelle is a results driven, innovative thinker and an experienced team builder. She's skilled in strategy, publicity, stakeholder liaison and team management, business development, event management and brand development across the creative industries commercial and not for profit organizations. She's the Deputy Chair of the Jane Goodall Institute of Australia. And she's done the foundation of governance program with the Australian Institute of company directors. I first met Michelle when I was engaged by the Jane Goodall Institute to support the recruitment of new board members. So I met her when I interviewed her for the board role. She impressed me in that interview with her passion, her wisdom and both her emotional and intellectual intelligence. So I'm super pleased that she's a great to speak with me today and share some of that spark with you. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Michelle,

M Michelle Shepherd 00:58
thanks Helga. Great TO be here.

H Helga Svendsen 01:01

I'm so pleased you can be. So before we talk about getting on a board and your pearls of wisdom there. I'd love to hear a little bit more about you. So tell me what was a young Michelle like?

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Michelle Shepherd 01:13

What was young Michelle like? Well, I guess I was some, I was very creative. As a child, I think, you know, I was always daydreaming and coloring in and creative. But I had this weird side to me, which is a little bit opposing to being creative, where I was really interested in business. I remember once I there was a my parents were paving out the back and I decided I was going to set up a flower stall thing because I could have the flowers, and then the pile of sand then became my flower shop. And I thought I could start a business. And I think I must have been about six at the time. But admittedly, this was in the backyard in my in our house at the time, and we in Wodonga, and no one came to my flower shop. So we shut down quite quickly. But that was my first interest. I thought business is fascinating. But I was very, very creatively inclined. So I've always tried to bring the two together,

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Helga Svendsen 02:02

You can totally see that in the sorts of work that you've done about bringing in both of those sides of what you do, and also part of your entrepreneurial spirit. So tell me when when did you get your first inkling that you might end up as a board director, and even more so a board director of an organization like the Jane Goodall Institute of Australia,

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Michelle Shepherd 02:19

Through work through my creative work, I would always want to be taken to the meetings where that would be discussing where we're going, discussing the strategy. What's next. And funny enough, and this is probably for another podcast, but I was often told when I was a very young employee that no no, that's that's not the meeting for you. Needless to say, I'd leave soon after. So I think again, I was always very intrigued. And then as I got further into my career, I would present to many boards. And I just got a real taste for being in that room and taking a deep dive into what are we doing? How do we progress? What's the best for the organization? And how do we make them most of the tools that we've got. So I think it was an interest from an early stage, even though necessarily the work I was doing at the time boards in the beginning, when it being part of it, it was something that I kind of grew to understand and know.

H Helga Svendsen 03:13
So even though you said it was for another time, you mentioned that you were told no, no, that's not for you. But it is for you. How did you move on through that?

M Michelle Shepherd 03:21
I've always been very independent, I guess I was always an independent child, I was never very good at being told that you can't do something. I think I must have heard very early on that if someone says no to you just go and find another way. And I think that I've done that throughout my career, if I didn't feel a situation was right, I would move on and not take on board the opinions of I guess the elders at the time who thought that girls shouldn't do certain things. So you had to be a master of something to be on a on a board, etc. So I just kept moving forward. That's all I would do. Just keep moving forward.

H Helga Svendsen 03:59
Fantastic.

H Helga Svendsen 04:00
And it's yeah, such great advice for other women out there who are no doubt hearing similar things, because sadly, it does still happen today. Just keep moving on. Just keep putting your hand up.

M Michelle Shepherd 04:11
That's right. And it does still happen today. It keeps us do get those comments every now and then.

H Helga Svendsen 04:16
So then I often ask people when we're talking about getting on a board how you got on your first board role. But of course, after the introduction, people know, in a way, or I know how you got on your first board role, I was there to interview you. But I'm wondering, from your side in that process, what was the process like what was the steps in getting your first board role if you can take us through that.

M Michelle Shepherd 04:37

It wasn't a deliberate decision. It wasn't something I had set out to do. I had actually been working with the Jane Goodall Institute as a volunteer, probably for good 18 months, almost two years beforehand and been very, very involved in the building of the social media, etc. Dr. Jane Goodall was coming over for tools. So 18 months prior to that, I said, "let me help". I was very familiar with the Institute on a global level. But the fact that I didn't realize they were in Australia, and they were literally in the office above me just shouted to me that you need to actually try and help them they not PRs and they're not publicists. So I said about doing that in the pro bono capacity. And while you know, working my day job, so I had set about doing that. And I got because of my instinct and my desire to understand business fully. I jumped in absolutely headfirst and got completely immersed in it and got to know the board. We did an amazing job in that tour in 2014. It took the organization to another level post tour, and really gave a few more opportunities for the organization to reposition, I knew that the board was going to be re-worked, there was going to be a repositioning on the board. And the chair at the time, Paul Smith, through full credit had said to me, maybe you might like to consider applying. And it wasn't until that moment. I kind of thought were you do or you don't you're going to do this. So you don't know what could be missing an opportunity. And I decided to make that my year of Yes. And I think there's a lot to be said about a year of Yes, we should do a podcast on that another time. But I decided to do it. And by doing it I actually was invited to interview and that's where I met you earlier. And what do you know, I actually got to sit on the board to which I'm really grateful to this day. And and that's been five years now.

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Helga Svendsen 06:26

Can you remember when you got the call or when you got notified that you'd been appointed to the board?

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Michelle Shepherd 06:31

Absolutely.

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Helga Svendsen 06:32

Tell us what happened?

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Michelle Shepherd 06:33

Again, Paul, Paul Smith had made the decision on you know, they'd been a decision and he gave me a call and I I must have thanked him 1000 times I think I was so really, really grateful for the opportunity and grateful that I'd sent Yes, and applied. And I thought that

proves that you should just do it just apply. If you get rejected, then you haven't lost anything, just apply. So it opened up a whole new window, for me a whole new window of opportunity and a whole new window of things to explore and learn. And I grabbed it with both hands. So as you know, very, very grateful to this day.

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Helga Svendsen 07:11

And so what happened then? What sort of, I mean, you were already involved in the organization. So you already knew quite a bit about them. But was there some sort of induction process? What happened? Then when you turned up for your first board meeting? How did it happen?

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Michelle Shepherd 07:24

There was a strategy meeting where we got to know the other directors, there was a there was a few new directors that had been brought on. And we took a deep dive into a weekend together where we really looked closely at who we were, in the context of the global chapters, what worked for us, what didn't we look through all of our policies and planned ahead what we needed to do, we set up various committees. And I think at that time, each of us was put on to probably two or three committees each. And then the following, I think six to eight months, it was a very, very intense period of three doing everything. It's almost like we reset our foundations. And so as a learning for new board director to go in and do that and suddenly say, right, we need to actually, you know, what is our code of conduct? Are we doing that the right way? What are our, what's our constitution saved, we need to redo that. So we literally turned everything upside down, looked at it through why we're doing this is good enough and rebuilt, we rebuilt the organization. So I was thrown in at the deep end. But I knew that it was the best way to learn. Fortunately, I was surrounded by brilliant minds that I could learn from, and I had my own skill set to bring to the table as well, so that I could put my take on things. So that ability to give and take I think certainly helps you in moments of imposter syndrome.

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Helga Svendsen 08:46

What are the key skills that you bring to the board table?

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Michelle Shepherd 08:49

Because I had been running essentially my own business, there was I'd never been really protected by an organization and let someone else make the decisions. The decisions that I made meant that I could get money every month, and I could pay staff, I had to learn the

hard way how to run business, deal with difficult people be in situations where the media can misconstrue things. And it can be said the wrong way it can be put out the wrong way. There's a lot around positioning and perception of a brand or a person that I would work with. So perception is a very big deal. And I think all of those, those perspectives, were things that I could throw into the mix and say that's not going to be received well, if we say with this, in the global chapters that. So I would definitely make sure that I spoke up. And you mentioned just a moment ago about imposter syndrome,

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Helga Svendsen 09:41

which again, is a common feeling for many of us. How do you manage to keep those skills and those incredible strengths that you've gotten that you bring to the broad table? How do you keep that front of mind, rather than that other little voice?

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Michelle Shepherd 09:53

I think with imposter syndrome, I did learn through working with a lot of very, very high profile people that they actually suffered from it as well. There's a questioning moment in the green room at the back of something where you can see where they go into deep thought and thankful Who am I right? I'm just going to fake it till I make it just get out there and do it. But really, for me, personally, I'm used to being the one at the back of the room guiding other people. So that's where that sits in for me. I'm not used to standing up in front of the room and being the one that everyone's listening to. So when it came to that voice, I've had to develop that. And I think I'm still developing that. I'm still not always that comfortable. But in my year of Yes, which started with the board position, I just do it anyway, if I'm given an opportunity. I'm just I just do it and whether I have to practice or whatever I need to do I just do it. So, which is why I'm here today, Helga. I'm just doing it. It's not normal for me.

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Helga Svendsen 10:52

Well, it might not be normal for you. But it's incredibly valuable for everybody else. So I'm so pleased that you managed to get yourself past and I love the concept of a year of years. It's just fantastic. In fact, just to go down a side path. What else did you say yes to?

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Michelle Shepherd 11:07

I said yes to that year, probably in my business, I'd probably pushed for things that I never thought that I would get in terms of clients. I said, Yes, if I think about, I was given an opportunity to go to the UK for the Jane Goodall Institute to be part of a global

committee. I was probably one of the oldest people in the room at the time. But I thought I'm just gonna say yes, anyway. And before I got on the plane, to head off to the UK for that global conference, I hit send on my application for leadership Victoria's Williamson program, which I said yes to applying for that as well. I just said I'm just going to do it. I actually was accepted onto that. So I'm part of the cohort for 2017. So that year of Yes, led to a number of other doors opening and it keeps going I keep saying it. So the universe is actually extended, I say no to the things that I know will drain my time now. So I'm more yes than no now. But it's so valuable.

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Helga Svendsen 12:04

So you're now the Deputy Chair of the Jane Goodall Institute of Australia. So as the deputy chair, you're no doubt now involved in recruiting other board members. So tell me about how your organization approaches recruitment of board members? How do you work out what you're looking for? What's the process you use? Do you advertise? Do you not advertise? How does it work?

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Michelle Shepherd 12:26

It very much comes down to where we are at the time and how we're looking to grow. We've moved into through various phases, I guess. And that was set out in the five year strategy that took place at very first board meeting, we sit down with a five year strategy, which was you know, to rebuild our foundations, etc. So at each step, we look at our board in terms of a skills matrix, and see which gaps we have missing. From there we rethink it. Is this really what we need? How would this work across the entire board? Do we have enough seats at the table is it going to be too many seats at the table? Then from there, we advertise? We do we put it out through our network, we put it out through any of the board websites that happy to take requests for new board members. And we put it out through people that we know as well. I guess we're quite specialized in the way that we're dealing with chimpanzee conservation and deforestation and a number of Africa programs, etc. So it's not essential to have a knowledge of those areas. But having an understanding of animal welfare and those sorts of things is very beneficial, I guess. From there, we usually we will divide it up between directors to kind of fine tune things. So that's what we'll do our reference checks, will obviously have a number of meetings with the candidate that we have selected. Beyond that, we tend to get the candidate to speak to the entire board as well individually and have individual conversations. So it gives our other people directors the opportunity to ask questions, to get a sense of how they feel that they will work with them, to get a sense of whether there's any extra areas that they could be involved in, because each director has their own perspective. That's how our usual path recruiting directors,

H Helga Svendsen 14:18
hmm, sounds like a really thorough path and a really great opportunity for not just the board to get to know the candidate, but for the candidate to also get to know the board and what they're coming into as well.

M Michelle Shepherd 14:28
That's right, we try to make it very equal. It is a big commitment, particularly with our board, because we're very hands on we're very operational.

H Helga Svendsen 14:36
What sort of commitment are you asking from people?

M Michelle Shepherd 14:39
we're looking at five hours a week really is a minimum, I would actually say that some of us tend to get involved in other things. So it means a little bit more. From what I've been told that five hours a week is generally that's quite a lot. And Helga, you may or may not disagree ...

H Helga Svendsen 14:56
My rule of thumb would be kind of 15 to 20 hours a month. So it's probably at the upper end. But it's not above the upper end of what I hear from other organizations of what sort of commitment people need to make knowing that that encompasses everything. So reading board papers, attending subcommittees, attending events, sometimes those sorts of things. For your board, what are the sorts of things that take up that time?

M Michelle Shepherd 15:18
We have our committees, we tend to refresh our committees every 12 months or so, committee meetings do lead to actions. And there is a lot of admin generally, that will go around that that the directors takeaway, there's obviously our board meetings, there might be various things that come up through the CEO that needs to be discussed with particular board members. So there might be you know, phone conversations, etc. I also think that it's really important to have good relationships with the other board directors, there's a pretty much all the board actually, I think about our entire board over the last few years, we stand shoulder to shoulder with things. So if there is other things to discuss,

and we're easy to pick up the phone to each other. So there will be other conversations around certain issues or opportunities as well. There's always other opportunities that we get within our various fields that come so it's about bouncing ideas of other directors before you take it to the table. Then obviously, we have board meetings, we have committee meetings, which happen roughly once a month, they might be extracurricular things that we do. Obviously, we're in the we're in the area of reforestation, animal welfare, etc. So I will, as a board member, I will go and do tree planting. I've got one next weekend. And I'll be joining our roots and shoots teams, which are young people age from four through to 24, who want to be a part of Dr. Jane Goodall's roots and shoots organization, which is about building leaders for the future, and students of the future who want to work across these things. So its hands on things like attending tree plantings, or beach cleanups, etc. But that's really, that's the bulk of it seems like quite a lot bit when you realize it's all about making a difference. And I think that's why a lot of the directors are in this, it's about how effective Can I be? How do I really make an impact against the causes that I'm interested in?

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Helga Svendsen 17:15

It's a great reminder again, often to choose the organization that you want to be a director of, I would say it needs to be something you're passionate about and prepared to give the time, whether it's paid or not, you still need to make that time and really feel strongly about what it is that you're participating in.

M

Michelle Shepherd 17:34

I completely agree. Helga, it's funny that the board chose me, I didn't choose the board, I chose to become a volunteer. So that was my natural passion anyway. But I do agree that when you've got board papers to check and committee papers to write for the board, and a lot to do, it does help when you are genuinely engaged and interested in what you're doing. Thinking about your board. I'm just back to your process for the board. And you talked about their that building right friendships with your other co directors is really important. How do you do that? How do you build the relationships with the others that you work with? It can be quite difficult because our board is spread across two cities, the head office is now located in Sydney, and I'm in Melbourne. So there's only one other director down here. That is from Melbourne. So I really try and connect as much as possible at strategy weekends, very good. But between board meetings, they'll be other things that I contact them on, whether it's issues that they're interested in ideas that I've seen down here, and really try and make the most of the times that we are together, I find being a board directory, because you're in the trenches with this group of people, you really do build special bonds. And I would say that, you know, and you have each other's

backs as well, to a degree, I think it's really important to always maintain that you are an individual that has a seat on the board, you need to stand for what you believe in, and you're responsible as well. So when it comes down to the legalities around being a board director, you need to be an individual. But there's a nice part around that as well that you're in something together. You're trying to make a difference for the organization, etc. So I make an effort. I really try and keep connected with the other board directors where I can.

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Helga Svendsen 19:17

We've covered a lot. We've covered a lot here around getting on a board, how to get on a board, how your organization gets people on a board, the building relationships, what are the sorts of things that people need to do? And also beautifully touched a little bit on that? How to keep going when other people tell you that's not your place? And how do you get past imposter syndrome? So I'm wondering, what are the main points that you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today.

M

Michelle Shepherd 19:46

If you feel you've got it in you to be a board director, then grab it with both hands and just start surrounding yourself with amazing podcasts like this one. If you if you Google, you'll find me many things online as well, just to give you a taste different things, some things aren't great. I googled, you know, some of the I heard that there was an amazing chair in Melbourne, who could just run things beautifully. And I thought I really want to have that skill set. I want to be able to flow through a meeting with grace. And that's my goal for this year. I'm looking at how to do that. So Google find things, listen to things you're not always going to agree. I would say 99% of the things that I look to and I and I hear I'm I'm like yeah, that's not me. It's not me. But that's okay, just keep searching. So if you feel you've got it in you take it up, join an accelerator program or join a intro program. I know, Helga has got a cracker, which I'm addicted to being a part of. Right, absolutely love that group of women. And I'm trying to actually work out how I stay part of it going forward, I think, you know, surround yourself with people who are doing it, and those who may be aspire to do it. And once you find your way, Australian Institute of company directors is fantastic. They've got amazing resources, you can learn so much they become a member, it seems like a big commitment. But I would actually become a member because that's your foundation. And from there, go off and find your tribe of people. And I would also say if you have other people around you who you think have amazing judgment, who would be skilled, but just think I can't do it. I've never be able to do that. It's all it's for Old Men, it's not for me, then grab them and take them to events, just take them to things and might bring them on the journey with you. Because I have to say that there's a growing

group out there of amazing young people who have good judgment and have an entrepreneurial heart and want to make a difference and who are really smart. So make sure you're taking them I always encourage my staff, to you know, one day you should be on the AFL board. Just think of that. And she's like, Oh, no, I've got to have a baby and I've got a baby and I couldn't have the time I'm like, just do it. Just find the time to do it. Because in 20 years time, I want to come to one of your charity lunches, and you'll be up there. It's not impossible. And I think you do need to take people on the journey with you. So don't give up, find your tribe. Just keep looking and take other people on the journey.

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Helga Svendsen 22:18

I knew having you on this podcast, Michelle would be fantastic. There are so many beautiful pearls of wisdom in there. And you've already talked about some resources to share. You've talked about some of the really practical actions people can take. So I think all that is left for me is to say thank you, thank you so much for sharing with the community today. I know there will be people that get a huge amount out of it. So thank you.

M

Michelle Shepherd 22:40

Thank you so much for having me, Helga. And I'll see you next week at your Board Accelerator.

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Helga Svendsen 22:44

Beautiful. Thank you.