



Take on Board

# Transcript – Jennifer Duncan

**Helga Svendsen 0:00**

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Jennifer Duncan about women leadership and how imposter syndrome sometimes holds us back from seeking roles such as directorships. First, let me tell you about Jennifer. Jennifer is Deputy Chair of Justice Reinvestment, South Australia, Deputy Chair of the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia and a member of the living stories advisory board. She was formerly on the South Australian Council of social service, the Australian Youth Affairs coalition Australian Red Cross South Australia and the South Australian health and community services skills board. So as you can see, she's got a wealth of experience to share with us today. She works in and with for purpose organizations. She's led and grown organizations and multimillion dollar projects and collaborated in the creation of successful startups. Jennifer's passion is working with organizations and communities seeking to make a genuine difference. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Jennifer

**Jennifer Duncan 0:58**

Thanks very much.

**Helga Svendsen 1:00**

So Jennifer, before we explore all of those amazing topics, we would like to do a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell us what was young Jennifer like? And when did you get your first inkling that you'd end up as a board director?

**Jennifer Duncan 1:13**

So look, I'd say that young Jennifer was quiet, bordering on shy, quiet, retiring, and not one to put herself forward. I found myself launched onto my first board through a role. So I was deputy director at the South Australian Council of social service. And my executive director decided that it was time for me to take a step forward and a step up. And I found myself launched onto the board of the South Australian health and community services skills board. I did not think of myself as a board director at that time. In fact, it probably took me a couple of years to really start building that idea of mine.

**Helga Svendsen 2:00**

I'd mentioned just before we started recording, that was my, well, not the South Australian skills board was not my first board. But my first board was the community services and health industry training advisory board. And I think probably the same as sitting on that board. I didn't necessarily consider myself a board director, even though clearly that's what I was.

**Jennifer Duncan 2:17**

You know, what I was in my head, I think was girl who was there because her boss sent her.

**Helga Svendsen 2:24**

And what an awesome boss you had, she was an awesome boss to recognize that and to give you that little push.

**Jennifer Duncan 2:30**

You know, one of the things that I really loved about her and I think one of the things that set behind me working with her was she had a really terrific ability to see talents and capabilities that one might not even have recognized oneself. And that's really important to me, actually now, as someone who's more advanced in my career to make sure I'm really attending to the young women who are following me to give them that kind of support. Push forward because without her standing behind me, given me a solid shove in the back. I think there are a lot of things that I wouldn't have done that I have done.

**Helga Svendsen 3:10**

Fantastic. Shout out to her. Can we name her Karen Grogan?

**Jennifer Duncan 3:13**

Yep. Executive Director of South Australian Council of social service. Absolutely awesome. Woman.

**Helga Svendsen 3:18**

Thanks, Karen, we need more like you. Was that your earliest experience of governance, or was there something that even can before that?

**Jennifer Duncan 3:25**

No. I think that really was. I'd worked previously within the higher education sector, a higher education sector, loves an advisory committee and the Governing Council of many different sorts. So I'd done a lot of what I would have described as committee work. But you know, actually, even as you asked me that question, I'm thinking, yeah, I was after voluntary student unionism came in Flinders University established a new organization. To provide student services, and I sat on that board before I sat on the health skills board. And isn't it funny how our brains just erase things because, sure I wasn't really that though, it wasn't really very special. I was just filling a chair the way that we downplay our achievements and come up with reasons why they might say special was so much so that I had entirely arised an entire board from my memory.

**Helga Svendsen 4:33**

It's so interesting, isn't it? I know, in my Board KickStarter program, we develop a resume for women for their board resume. And every single time I hear stories like this about I know, I haven't been on a board before. I mean, you know, I was president of the school Council, but I haven't been on the board before, for example, and you're like, Okay, a school Council has incredible complexity, and risk and strategy issues and all sorts of things. So it is an excellent reminder to really think back through the things that we've done. Whether it's involved in university things or school or student committees, whatever they may be, they are governance.

**Jennifer Duncan 5:14**

100%. I mean, for other reasons. This year, I found myself having to go through a really conscious process of reflecting on my professional achievements. I think when I started that process, I was kind of sitting around and thinking, I don't know like, what have I done, I really feel like I've done anything very much. And as I sat down, and this literally took me weeks because a who wants to think about themselves that much, but also be when we forget things and we dismiss them, we bury them pretty deep and so bringing them up, certainly takes time. But I would actually really encourage everybody to do this. Start a document Write down as you go along everything that you've done that you consider an achievement, because otherwise, in 10 years time, you're going to be sitting around and scratching your head. And you will still eventually get to the point of thinking, Oh, hi, yeah, to that thing, and to do that thing to completely forgotten about it. But I think that actually keeping a brag least Yes, is a really great way of keeping uppermost in mind that you're doing awesome things. And there are things that you should be proud of, and the things that you should be telling other people as well. I often recommend to people to keep their annual performance review, or whatever it may be, because that's often where you put down what you've done. And five years later, two years later, maybe one year later, you won't remember those things, right. So I love the idea of having a shopping list of achievements that you can just draw out when you need to.

**Helga Svendsen 6:51**

You wanted to talk today about women leadership and how impostor syndrome you know, impacts and sometimes holds us back. Yeah, we've already talked on some of those things in recognizing our own achievements, and a reminder to keep those in a bit of a shopping list or a brag list somewhere, maybe in thinking about your own board journey. I mean, we've heard that you got a bit of a push at the start. How have you managed to kind of wear that cloak of being a board director with confidence?

**Jennifer Duncan 7:18**

Yeah, look, I draw a really clear connection in my head, between my journey on boards and my personal leadership journey. So I think certainly for my first boards, it was a matter of being approached by people, which is probably where I got the confidence to feel that there was value that I could add into a board because I would not necessarily have put myself forward. But the flip side of that also sits around my leadership journey. And so again, I think I said I was quite a quiet person, quite a reserved person. You know, I am an out and proud introverted And there are a lot of characteristics that introverts have. That can mean that we sometimes get sidelined. One of the things that I was really lucky to be able to do relatively early on in my career was to rediscover purpose. And purpose has been a great vehicle for me. It's been a great driver for me to think beyond what's the stuff that makes me comfortable, and to move into where is the opportunity that I have to create impact. And so, these two things have been really important things to me in terms of my board journey. Purpose has determined the boards that I've selected to go on. And purpose is also the thing that when I'm on the board, enables me to put down the mantle of myself difference with self discipline. Patience, and my preference to sit in the background rather than the foreground. And it's really enabled me to engage in, you know, very upfront leadership and be a really strong participant on the boards that I've been involved in.

**Helga Svendsen 9:19**

So in a really practical sense, how did you do that? How did you sit down? Have you got, you know, your own personal purpose statement? How have you used that in a practical sense with choosing which boards you're on or maybe which boards you're not on?

**Jennifer Duncan 9:32**

I had no business experience. I was working in the higher education sector, and I had applied to participate in an ethical leadership program, which I desperately wanted to do. And I worked so hard on my application. I was really proud of it. I still remember its content now, which indicates how hard I worked on it. And I was unsuccessful in my application. And I remember having The feedback phone call with someone from the organization not applied to. And she said, Look, you know, really the reason that you weren't successful in your application was we just didn't see the opportunity for

impact. We see that you're working within an organization and we think about the ripple effect that our programs will have. And it seems to why's that you picked a pond in which the ripple will be limited. And, you know, I put down the phone, I was obviously devastated. And after I recovered from my devastation, I realized how entirely bright that she was. And I thought what I'm doing now is not what I wanted to do when I left University. The stuff I'm doing is fine, but I didn't have a burning passion for it. And I've got a really clear sense of the world that I want to live in and I've got a better understanding now of the way I could contribute to that world. And that was the key to me changing my career path. And that also has been the criteria against which I assess my board rose, does this organization constitute a really clear values fit for me? Does this organization seek to have the impact in its world that I also see? And if the answer to those questions is yes, I've also now reached a point in my career where I can say, the third question, which is can I make a contribution? I know the answer to and so on that basis, if those things fit, I'll move ahead. That's a great way of thinking about the boards that you want to be on making your contribution but also values fit for you. Not to sniffing up whatever comes along. But the one that we you are passionate about what it can do. Look, and there is only one risk in that. That is something I've been thinking about recently as well. So the risk is that those criteria still lead you into invitations. So you see a space and you think against those criteria. Can I feel that space? I think that works well, up to a point it worked well for me up to a point because it enabled me to move into spaces that I would not forced my way into. But there also then becomes a point at which you need to start asking yourself and what does it give to me? Is there a challenge that I'm going to get out of this that I will particularly enjoy? So a lot of my purpose has been around service, but I also now I'm much more willing to accept that service must also be combined with the stretch. Stretch is what I get out of it.

**Helga Svendsen 13:09**

So you've got a fourth criteria. I do things now. Right? The list is growing. Yeah. So the boards that you're currently on, you're on three boards now. Yeah. So justice reinvestment Youth Affairs Council of South Australia, living stories advisory board. Yes. I'm assuming they all meet, meet your three and probably four criteria?

**Jennifer Duncan 13:29**

They do. And I think I'm also looking to add to that collection. Um, I think that I've reached a point where I'm ready to take a further step in terms of challenging complexity. And so I'm also actively looking at the minute for a fourth option that's going to help with that.

**Helga Svendsen 13:54**

Okay, well, you know, let's see if the take on board community can help. Wouldn't that be awesome? What's your dream board?

**Jennifer Duncan 14:01**

Whoa, that's a great question. I've come to sit on the board of a larger organization. In order for it to be values feed, it needs to be for purpose, though not necessarily not for profit. It needs to do some really creative and innovative work. And that's not just the organization, but very much the board. You know, I think being creative and innovative organizations can have sleeper boards. I really came when I go to a board meeting, to feel that we are actively adding value to the organization and what it does and that we are acting as appropriate custodians and leaders within our row. I always look to sit around a table with people who are smart and engaged and turned on and you know, in that room when they're in the room, and I'm looking for boards that thing in really challenging and complex ways about how they create the future for their organization.

**Helga Svendsen 15:09**

So is there a particular sector that you would be looking at or you sector agnostic?

**Jennifer Duncan 15:14**

Look, I can tell you that I'm sector agnostic, and I believe it in a way, but I must be honest and say, my first and abiding love is for purpose community organizations that seek to address inequality in our community. Yeah, that's where I'm drawn. That really is that's my purpose. And so that tends to be what I'm looking for. I'd be open to an offer from Haigs chocolate, say....

**Helga Svendsen 15:47**

All right, well, we'll have to make sure we send this on to them.

**Jennifer Duncan 15:50**

I'm a good South Australian girl, I love Haigs.

**Helga Svendsen 15:54**

Well, yeah, I'm not a good South Australian girl, but who doesn't? And for those international people, listening Haigs is this fantastic chocolate company based in Adelaide, South Australia, I'm absolutely the a huge chocolate frogs...

All of the chocolates, are known Australia wide so for, the boards that you're on and the boards that you've been on in the past, and even the ones that might be coming up in the future. You talked

about one of your criteria being that you can really make a contribution. What's your value? What is it that you add to the board disagreeing?

**Jennifer Duncan 16:32**

My board colleagues may not see it that way. What is my value add to this is kind of sounds, again, possibly a bit self deprecating. It's not intended to my contribution is have a really solid participant. I prepay. I go into those conversations with a sense of what I want to explore and the destination that we We should be working towards in our conversations as a board. I am in that room when I'm in that room, I'm not sitting there being somewhere else. And so I really invest in the work of the board. I think also having set on boards but also worked as an executive two boards. I know how important it is for boards to have their own strong purpose and vision for what they deliver into the organization. I am passionate about the fact that boards are not tick and flick. If boards are not actively adding value, then they should be moving on. If boards are not evaluating their performance, then they ought to start really quickly because if a board specs, evaluation, measurement and performance from its executive, then it must lead by example.

**Helga Svendsen 18:08**

So for the boards that you've been on, are you able to share a story with us about maybe an organization? Probably one that's done? Well, I'm guessing you're not necessarily able to share a story where something's not going well, but maybe you are able to share a story about an organization that have done that really well that a valuable self evaluation, or even you touched on the board really knowing their purpose.

**Jennifer Duncan 18:29**

Yeah, look at a story that I'm in at the minute. So my role on the youth council of South Australia, I've been on that board now for just over a year. We've got some awesome directors who sit around that table. And this year, we've been really actively involved in the conversation about where is this organization going? Youth Affairs Council is a relatively small organization. We have a really strong purpose which sits around advocacy and young people's involvement. But we're really committed to thinking creatively about what that looks like let's just in three or five years time, but in 10 years time, so we've done quite a lot of work this year, designing a process for really challenging the organization around its future. Setting really clear goals for the organization's future, setting really clear measurements and evaluation structures, because we recognize that it's one thing to set direction, but it's quite another to achieve it. And that that kind of work really requires ongoing monitoring is part of it. But really taking the information that you get through monitoring to continually feed in a constant loop to inform the organization's ongoing work. And that's been really fun. I think that's been something that's been really energizing for us as a board. The board this year has done an evaluation. I'm a massive fan of the develop your board tool, it's run through QUT, the not for profit unit at QUT.

**Helga Svendsen 20:24**

I haven't seen that myself. Oh actually put on if you send me a link will make sure we have got it in the shownotes.

**Jennifer Duncan 20:28**

I absolutely will. It's incredibly accessible. The content of the reports is really high quality. It measures not just a board's performance against its own perception, but a benchmark sports against other organizations and seeing my colleagues get the feedback about how we're going and how that compares to other organizations has been really fun and inspiring. And so I'm really loving being part of group of people who take really seriously the contribution that we seek to make to the organization through the board, and are taking really conscious and deliberate steps to implement, you know, our aspiration, which is to be the best board that we can be for an organization that we all love, who we seek to make relevant for decades to come.

**Helga Svendsen 21:23**

Following that border evaluation, what are some of the changes that came about as a result of that?

**Jennifer Duncan 21:28**

So we're still in conversation, the areas that we think that we can be stronger in around strategy, and also around how we work with our executive. So we sat down over the report just last week. And we've already set some really clear goals around strategy development. We've had conversations about what are the resources that we need as a board to make sure that we're on top of the things that we need to be on Top of as directors, and that those who sit around the table are all at the same point with the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia. So a big part of our agenda is to ensure that we have young people involved in our governance structures. So that always means that there's quite a mix of skills and experience sitting on the board. So we've talked about what support we need to bring into place in order for that to work in order for us to live our values in the best possible way.

**Helga Svendsen 22:30**

So I'm thinking about the process that you've done for your board evaluation, and you talked about the benchmarking that came out of there in the evidence. And I'm thinking one of the topics for us today was about imposter syndrome and how valuable evidence is in imposter syndrome because we often sit in the boardroom and think, Oh, I'm not so good at this, or what am I doing here? And



why isn't the next person here, and then you get some evidence before you and realize that you are actually making that valuable contribution.

**Jennifer Duncan 22:59**

That's it, Helga. The board of the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia at the minute is entirely composed of women. And the develop your boards process looks at where does this board think it should be? Where is this board, and it also benchmarks the board externally. So again, this is a board comprised entirely of women, you will not be surprised when I tell you that in every domain, our expectations for where we should be, we're in advance of where we were, and yet, we benchmarked above the mean or in the top 25% of the majority of domains. So that seems to me to be a classic example of women making themselves had In spite of the fact that their comparative performance is very good.

**Helga Svendsen 24:04**

So what's your advice to women who are thinking about seeking a board role and haven't quite yet because they might not think they're up for it, or seeking an additional board role or even as you've described her in the boardroom? What's your advice to women who are feeling a bit of that imposter syndrome?

**Jennifer Duncan 24:20**

Stop telling yourself that other people are better? Stop telling yourself that you need to wait until you're better. I was not ready for my first board, you are never ready for your first board. So you kind of just need to pick yourself up and make yourself do it. Otherwise, you will always have a reason for telling yourself not yet.

**Helga Svendsen 24:47**

And maybe you felt like you weren't ready for that first board and you've got a bit of a shove in the back.

**Jennifer Duncan 24:53**

If I think about that first board. They were a lot of a lot of firsts when I was on that. board. And in hindsight, being not just kind to myself, but being fair to myself, I navigated those challenges. Well, thoughtfully, taking advice, seeking help where I needed it, and with every ounce of my conscientiousness and so, sitting here now talking to you and thinking about it, I can say, I was ready

for that first board. I just told myself that I wasn't. And then that became a fixed part of my narrative.

**Helga Svendsen 25:40**

I was thinking that as you said it You said I, you know, I wasn't ready. And and, and I was thinking to myself, Well, clearly you were, yeah, because you joined that board and you made a contribution. So even if you don't feel ready, maybe push yourself along anyway. Get somebody to give you a push or push yourself along or seek the evidence from others have said Sometimes finding and just asking others do you think I'm ready for board? Oh god. Yeah, yeah, yeah, do it.

**Jennifer Duncan 26:04**

I've been wondering why you haven't thought about it. You said. Yeah, exactly.

**Helga Svendsen 26:07**

Yeah, exactly. Right. So just do it.

**Jennifer Duncan 26:10**

Yeah, absolutely. You know, and even if you fail failing forward, because of course, we fail, we always fail. We always come out of experiences and think I wish I'd done that differently, which is fine. As long as your next rapid rider is, and next time I will. And now that I know how I'm going to, I can put that to bed until I need it.

**Helga Svendsen 26:38**

Wouldn't it be great if more boards did reflect on what they had done and reflect on what they could do differently? I sometimes wonder whether that does happen in some of the other boards.

**Jennifer Duncan 26:51**

Absolutely. And again, you sort of touched on one of my favorites issues. Um, imposter syndrome is absolutely one of them. I made a Lot of perfectionist women and how do I know that they're a perfectionist woman? It's because when I say to them, but of course you're a perfectionist, and they say, Oh, I am not perfect, which is like, that's not what I said. I said, You're a perfectionist in the fact that that was your response rather proves the point. But the third one that I love, and it is less well known is a thing called the Dunning Kruger effect. Are you familiar with the I have?

**Helga Svendsen 27:32**

I have heard of the Dunning Kruger effect, but it's not. You're going to refresh my mind right now.

**Jennifer Duncan 27:36**

I love it. It's my favorite thing. Right. And it's a conundrum you never really know where you sit on the Dunning Kruger scale, but the Dunning Kruger effect says that those who are most competent and capable, often feel least because we're quite preoccupied with what we don't know. Those who are listening competent and capable, often feel most, because they're not knowing what they don't know. And honestly, not necessarily being terribly bothered by it. They feel very high levels of confidence. So again, really competent, capable people who tend to reflect on self criticism, don't necessarily have the confidence that they should. Whereas those who are unfettered by self knowledge, will often feel highly capable and stepping in with great confidence. And it's just one of those fascinating things. And again, I think it's a reminder that if you are aware of the unknown unknowns, you're actually streets ahead of most

**Helga Svendsen 29:00**

It's interesting thinking about that, you know, the Dunning Kruger effect on an individual level, but also potentially on a collective level. Yeah, the board. Absolutely. You know, lots of the research around diversity on boards says, the more diverse your board is, the better the decisions will be. However, the less confident the board will feel in those decisions, because they've been tested more. And it's the total opposite of groupthink in a way, so I'm thinking that that sort of research is the kind of collective lip level of the Dunning Kruger effect.

**Jennifer Duncan 29:32**

Absolutely. Because again, that means that a board is aware of the fact that there are alternative perspectives out there. And that itself kind of shakes your confidence, right? Because, hey, like that means that the way I've always thought about things, and this is certainly the possibly be the case, but I think that's a really that's a really great observation and Also, I just would all love to say on the topic of board diversity, and I'm noting that in the past week, I think it is we have just tipped over the 30% on is exports. I think that's the measurement. And can we start having a conversation about board diversity that goes beyond gender

**Helga Svendsen 30:22**

Listeners will have heard me say this before, but I always like to think about equality on boards, gender equality on boards. And diversity. That's right, because I don't I also don't want the diversity

argument, meaning we don't get equality. So I like to think of them as two separate things out agree more and 30% is great, but it's it's the start.

**Jennifer Duncan 30:41**

You know, that opinion is great, but you're being optimistic and saying it's the start and that's very kind and I wish that I was feeling glass half full in this very moment, but it's still poor.

**Helga Svendsen 30:53**

There's more work to do. Absolutely. Jennifer, we have covered so much here, so many amazing valuable things in there. So what are the main points you want people to take away from this conversation?

**Jennifer Duncan 31:07**

Just do it, I think. Stop thinking about what you can't bring, start talking to yourself about what you can bring. Find something that aligns with your personal purpose. Because if you're working to an external goal, I think that can often really help in putting to the side the internal barriers that we can tend to develop for ourselves. And if that's not enough, then think about yourself as a role model as an exemplar, you know, we are still in a stage where there are young women growing up behind us who need to see as who need to see as taking leadership roles who need to see us sitting on board You need to feel that the organizations that work with them are reflective of them. So if you're not quite ready to do it for yourself, then do it for her. Do it for that young woman who's currently working out where she's going to go in life.

**Helga Svendsen 32:17**

Could not agree more. Do you have a resource or that you would like to share with the take on board community?

**Jennifer Duncan 32:23**

I do. It's a book that I was looking at recently. I haven't actually read it properly for well, coincidentally, about 12 years, which is about as long as I've been a director, which is about as long as I've been pursuing a purpose driven career. That book is a book called Synchronicity. It's written by a guy called Joe Jaworski, and it is about finding your inner path to leadership. It is absolutely about discovering your personal purpose, and then using that purpose as your vehicle growth.

**Helga Svendsen 33:00**

Oh, fantastic. We'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes as well. Absolutely Fabulous. Thank you so much for joining us today on the Take on Board podcast

**Jennifer Duncan 33:08**

Thanks for coming all the way over to South Australian to do this as well.

**Helga Svendsen 33:12**

Absolutely might have been here anyway. But I should also say just in the final parts here, if you've heard some background noise here, Adelaide airport is beautifully close to Adelaide city. So if you've heard some rumblings in the background that might just be the flights going to inform. But I'm sure the beautiful pearls of wisdom that Jennifer shared with us would have drowned out any of that background noise. So thank you again for being with us here today. And you know, sharing some of your wisdom with our community.

**Jennifer Duncan 33:40**

It's been a heap of fun. Thanks for asking me