



Take on Board

Transcript – Jocelyn Furlan

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Jocelyn Furlan. Initially we had planned to speak about being an effective board member governance challenges and the establishment of the superannuation complaints tribunal Advisory Council and where that led, however, for reasons that you will know in just a moment, we've kind of changed the focus of this conversation. So let me tell you a bit more about Jocelyn. Jocelyn is on the board of First State Super. She's the chair of the board at Strathcona Baptists Girls Grammar School, and she's on the external compliance committee for Vanguard and the chair of customer owned Banking Association code compliance committee and financial counseling Australia so she's got a wealth of governance experience. She's also the former chair of the superannuation complaints tribunal and super life. And you'll note from her board history that as I mentioned, she is the chair of the board at Strathcona Baptist Girls grammar school. So given where we are in Australia and indeed the world with Corona virus and covered 19. We will be focusing a bit more on that and what their thinking has been over the last week or weeks, maybe month, although I think a month ago feels like an eternity ago. So we'll focus on that as part of the conversation today. Her passion is an Australian community empowered and confident about their financial affairs. She works with financial service providers to maximize member and customer centricity in their products and services, and assisting them to implement best practice in remediation and dispute resolution. She's a graduate of the Australian Institute of company directors and holds law and commerce degrees. Welcome to the take on board podcast, Jocelyn. Thank you, Hilda. It's so great to have you here. So before we explore a bit more either about the superannuation complaints advisory tribunal and or about Strathcona and how the governance decisions around coronavirus before we get there Tell us a story about young Jocelyn that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Jocelyn Furlan 2:05

I think one of the influencing factors and it's a somewhat of an unusual story when I was seven, my father is Swiss. And he was born in Switzerland and his relations are all in Switzerland. And when I was seven, I was the eldest of four. And Mum and Dad decided that it would be a good idea for various reasons to send me to Switzerland for a year. So my father flew over with me and he stayed with me for a month and then he came home. And I stayed in Switzerland and I lived with my aunt and my uncle and my three cousins, who were very put out about having this weird, Young Australian child living with MRSA. And my middle cousin who's my age had to share her bedroom with me and she wasn't happy about that at all. It was a very difficult year it was back in with this is gonna age me but it was back in 1970, where nobody in Switzerland spoke English and we had we didn't have some computers and laptops and Skype and all those kinds of things. So I didn't actually speak to my mother for a year, and I went to school over there and because we start school much

earlier here in Australia, when I went to the school, they put me into the class with my older cousin who was two years older than me. So I was the youngest in the class, which was also quite challenging socially, not to mention being from Australia. And I flew home by myself and flew into Sydney and was so reunited with my dad. And then we flew to Melbourne where the family was, and I, I remember distinctly when I left my youngest sister was a baby nappies and I came home and she was a walking toddler. So I couldn't pick her up in the way that I'd kind of dreamed about while I was away for a year and I came home and I couldn't speak in English. I completely forgotten all my English and so it only took a week or so to come back. But it was interesting that I was completely immersed in in a Swiss life. And I think that the value of that for me is it made me realize that although I can be a bit self indulgent at times that I know that when things really get tough can get going. And that's been very helpful for me. I think also, it was in a very early experience of losing that sense of invulnerability that we all have as children, where we just think we can go on in our own kind of little world and just proceed. And we're not really affected by the things that go on around us that are different or challenging or hard. And I think despite the fact that it's taken me a very long time, if ever to forgive my parents for doing that to me, and I would never do it to my own children. I think that it has definitely made me a lifelong learner and the self aware person that I am today.

Helga Svendsen 4:36

Wow, what an amazing story. You know, of really, gosh, building that resilience from such an extraordinarily young age. How amazing.

Jocelyn Furlan 4:47

I do. Remember when my oldest child was seven, one of his friends came over to stay for one night, the friend's mother rang twice, and I thought, Wow, what a different experience that is, and that was cause for affliction. I don't I think one of the other things I've learned is I never regret anything. And I don't regret that either. I think I wouldn't be who I am without it. And I wouldn't be the leader that I am without that experience.

Helga Svendsen 5:11

It is a fantastic lesson from your parents, albeit a very tough lesson and the complete opposite of you know, what do they say helicopter parenting?

Jocelyn Furlan 5:18

Oh, yes. And the new one is lawnmower parents where they walk in front of the child and mow the grass so that they have a completely clear green beautiful life.

Helga Svendsen 5:29

That was clearly not your mother's philosophy. No, no. date. I'm guessing it was also I mean, obviously for a seven year old not being able to talk to their siblings and their and your parents. That's tough, but I'm guessing it was also really tough on her.

Jocelyn Furlan 5:43

Yes, I've, for a long time wanted been curious about how she could have made a decision like that. And interestingly with my three siblings, my next one went for nine months when she was 13. And the two younger ones went together for six months when they were 13 years old. And so I think maybe they thought perhaps seven was a little bit young but curious to go think about going through that decision making process as a parent

Helga Svendsen 6:08

Did you manage to convince your Swiss classmates that kangaroos were bouncing everywhere around in Australia and that you had a koala as your own pet? Do you?

Jocelyn Furlan 6:19

Of course. And they all they made a book for me when I left of them beautiful, which I still got. They all did little drawings because they're beautiful drawers in Switzerland, and they will try to draw kangaroos. For me. It was very cute.

Helga Svendsen 6:35

That is fantastic. Again, fantastic to hear some of the stories and just hearing what makes people what they are today. So interestingly, in amongst all of your board roles, obviously there's a number in the financial services sector, but today, given what's going on in our world at the moment, I'd love to at least start with a focus on Strathcona. This episode will go to air on the 25th of March. We're recording it on the 18th of March. So be aware that with a very fast moving nature of coronavirus, a lot might have changed. So as you're listening to this, folks just know that it was recorded a week ago. And at the moment a week is a very long time. However, given what's going on with coronavirus, and given the conversations around schools and the roles of boards at the moment, given your chair of the board, I would love to have a chat about that. You're the chair of the board, what's been going on.

Jocelyn Furlan 7:31

I might go a little bit backwards and say I've been Chair of the Board for coming up to three years. The priorities that I had when I became chair was to have a look at the governance of the school generally, it's fair to say that schools are at varying stages of their governance and are at varying stages of having boards that are capable and willing to focus on the strategic issues rather than the operational issues. So we've our school board has been going on a bit of a journey. Traditionally, I think a lot of school boards or school councils have actually filled in some management gaps as well and brought their expertise to the table. So we have a property expert who's who's just terrific, but does go and look at the stairs and the, you know, the various things that need a little bit of maintenance here and there. And we've got a marketing expert, who was on the Marketing Committee, which we disbanded, but we'll look at the detail of enrollments, the detail of the marketing strategy had input into the marketing strategy, but I think we're schools need to be now and it's a real challenge for principals because they have to be CEOs. So what I've really tried to do since I've been chairing the board of Strathcona is really support the principal to enable and empower her to be a CEO as well as a principal but also to say that's what we need and there is a lots of articles in the press about the stress on principals of schools, but it is their multimillion dollar enterprises and the skills required to be an effective principal now Not just that there have been an excellent teacher, their education pedagogy is second to none without principles ease, but she's also developing as a CEO. For the first time last year, we approved an entire suite of risk risk management framework, a risk management strategy, risk management reports, all those kinds of things. And we also, for the first time last year, did a 10 year forward financial plan. And we did some scenario planning on various different types of fee increases because of affordability and all that sort of stuff. So that's, that's kind of the background environment. So when the Coronavirus happened. Fortunately, at our school, our principal is surrounded by an outstanding leadership team and they got themselves ready for school closure at two or three weeks ago, thinking that that might be on the horizon. So all of the technology was updated. All of the staff has been trained. It started to be part of the conversation with the students and then on on the week. It became apparent that the decision to close or not to close the school was a real one. We don't have a case of coronavirus in our school at the moment. But on Sunday, the principal rang me and said she wanted to close the school in an orderly way. So it's Wednesday today, she wanted to close the school. Announce to the parents on Monday, close the school after school on Tuesday, have a staff training day today and start online learning for the students tomorrow. It's actually not closing the school. It's doing everything by remote learning rather than physical learning. And they've got everything set up so that they will do roll calls for each lesson. So that the students will be expected to be there. They also have have made no bones about the fact that they know when the students are logged on, on off, and they will be taking a note of that. So the idea is to substitute face to face learning with online learning so but one of the interesting things for me and when the principal rang me on Sunday, we had a long conversation about it. Was, what's the proper role of the board? Is this an operational decision or a strategic decision? The principal, let me know that she has, they have set up a group of principals of like minded schools to provide support for each other, which I think is great. And she told me that some of the principals were telling her that some of the other chairs of the board's had a different approach to mine. My approach is that it was ultimately the principal's decision, not the Board's decision. It was an operational decision, but with strategic impact, such that I thought that her consulting with me was a good idea and asking me was a good idea, not

asking me but consulting with me, and she asked me what she should do with the rest of the board because she wanted to move on it. And we had a board meeting or normal board meeting scheduled for last night anyway, but she wanted to move on this earlier and my advice to her for better or worse was I think, you should ask for forgiveness rather than permission board and that you should inform them that this is what you want to do. Talk to them about how you've mitigated the risks by having an orderly closed rather than a closure caused by the worst case scenario is that you get coronavirus in your school, you have to close straight away You have to do all of the things about the contact and the casual contact and a whole lot of kids have to become isolated and all that sort of stuff, as distinct from what we've been able to do, which is have an orderly closure. We talked a bit about the fact that the government at this point on the 18th of March, the government's advice is to keep schools open, we've actually decided to close but I support her that she's made the right decision. And so we had the board scheduled board meeting last night, and we had a conversation about it at the board table and one of the board directors said so do you want a resolution to close the school? And I said no, actually, I think we, we note in the minutes that the board has been informed has been given the opportunity to talk about their thoughts about it has listened to the principal and the business manager talk about the readiness for online learning, and supports the decision of the principal which is the way we went but I think anything like this, it's a really great opportunity to change Just make sure for us directors that we take a step back and make sure that we're not getting involved in operational issues. in an environment of semi crisis like this one, it's really easy to get tempted to go to go into the operational stuff because you want to help and you want to do things and you want to, there were various things said at the board table, like, Are we going to stop doing our marketing? What are we going to do about financial assistance for families, all this sort of stuff. And I my approach to That is to say, those are really good points, let's say to management, we'd like them to go and think about those things. So one of the things we did about the financial systems because this is going to have massive negative impact for financial impacts of families. And we know that paying private school fees is a huge commitment in some families, a luxury item, kind of because you can get education in non fee paying schools. But I think it's really important to have a controlled and thoughtful approach and a consistent approach. So what the border business managers do like at the board meeting last night was actually dust off our financial assistance policy, bring it back through the Finance Committee to the next board meeting for us to establish a framework, a board approved framework for the principal to then use when all of the people come to her to say either they say I'm not going to proceed with my enrollment in two years seven next year. And we thanks a conversation about that, or really, I'm going to struggle to pay next terms face when next free run is done in May. And we're also going to think about supporting the principal in her crafting of the field or in May, at the end of each year. The chair that's me always sends out a letter about the next year's fees. So it might be that the board decides depending on the reaction and what happens over the next little while in terms of contact from parents, or guardians who are struggling with fees. It might be that there's a letter from the chair that goes with the next fee run, if that strategically makes sense. So there are a whole range of things you can do, you can give fee relief, you can give interest free, you can defer payment, you can waive payment. It's important, I think, for us to consider in a considered way a framework so that we don't have one parent saying, Oh, they waive my fees, but they've only given you interest relief or something like that, to actually have a framework to go forward. And I think that's where the board can contribute. Because half the first appearance and half of us are not, there's a couple of alumni, we've got a good range of people on the board. And it's much more important for us to get involved with setting the

framework and then empowering management to make the individual decisions. So we want the individual decisions to come to us. We think it's more helpful to turn our strategic mind to the things we need to think about in this environment, in a considered and calm way, in an environment where quite frankly, I feel quite depressed about not only the virus but the way we're behaving as with respect to toilet paper and beef. It's a great opportunity for learning for all councils and boards of schools history will tell whether we've made the right decision or the wrong decision. Interestingly, one of the board directors is a parent of children at a different school that's also closed and they had to close because a parent of ours and he is very underwhelmed by the remote learning and the online learning and the following up have the students whereas in our school, fortunately, because we've got such a been planning this for some time, and we've got a great team, there is a cascade of care because the the mental health of the girls is as important as their education and their learning. So the management has built in a process for checking in with the girls and the staff to make sure that that community connectedness that's lost from the physical interaction is, is maintained as much as we can for as long as we have to do online learning rather than face to face learning.

Helga Svendsen 16:48

Oh, my goodness, there is so much in there, just learn. I'm so glad we are focusing on this topic, because there is just a wealth of information in there. I mean, the things I'm hearing is that you're very well planned. In this as an organization, you're, you're not making plans, you're picking up plans and amending and diverting and doing them slightly differently. But you're not you're absolutely not starting from scratch. And you started early. You started a month ago when no one was really thinking about this in any serious way. The other thing I'm really hearing in there is that the, the journey that your board has been on, and I'm glad you started with that around what is operational and what is governance, you are very firmly staying in the governance space, which often for an organization in crisis, you're absolutely right, the board gets their hands dirty, but it sounds like you are very consciously focusing on this is a crisis. It's actually a worldwide crisis. But for your school, it's a you know, it's an operational crisis. It's not a governance crisis.

Jocelyn Furlan 17:48

I think there's a couple of things. The one thing that we do at the end of each board meeting is one of the board directors does an appraisal of the meeting. We have a template with four or five points on it that they need to address as they do the process. And one of those was in a meeting sufficiently strategically focused and not focused on operations. And so what was terrific at the end of the board meeting last night was for the person who did the appraisal to say, despite what's going on, I think we did stay appropriately strategically focused. I mean, we, we got to be operational because of the nature of the beast at the end of every board meeting, we know. And that template is included in the board papers. So we know that one of us is going to answer the question. Have we stayed in the right space? Do we remember what our roles are? The other thing too, that I think is so important and critical and underlines. The approach is to always remember what our purposes so our purpose in this crisis is to care for our school community. And so the problem we're solving for is what's the best way to care for the school community. And the reason it was easy for me to support

the principal's decision, despite the government saying the opposite was that we've been Both believed this was the best way to support the school community like we've got. And I, in fact, amazing story. Someone who knows a parent at the school and is involved in the medical profession and her spouse is also in the medical profession. And they have young children at the school. And we were acutely conscious that the reason the government is not disclose schools is because we need the people who are working in the health profession to be at work. That parent took the time to express support for the decision to close the school at me knowing about it, and I felt vindicated in the decision, but I also felt that they and the way they expressed it was that they knew that the principal was taking calories and decisions, to do the best thing that we could for the entire school community, which is our purpose. Obviously, our main purpose is advancing education. But the way to do that the best way you know how is to support the school community.

Helga Svendsen 19:55

And again, such a beautiful eye you have a clearly defined purpose. Be it's front of mind for you and see you're acting on it in everything that you do. Firstly, you said you had a conversation with the principal on Sunday. You supported the principal and then you happen to have the board meeting on Monday night anyway, Tuesday night, Tuesday night. Sorry, as the chair, did you have conversations with others on the board in the interim or just await that board meeting on the Tuesday night?

Jocelyn Furlan 20:23

I didn't have conversations with the directors in the interim, had we not had the meeting on Tuesday night, I probably would have also, the principal wrote to all the directors on Monday and I responded to everybody saying my that I was supporting the decision and the reasons are supporting the decision. So read would have contacted them Had it been necessary to keep them informed of what was going on. But because everything was happening so fast, and they will fully informed 18 hours of me having the conversation with the principal, it didn't turn out to be necessary.

Helga Svendsen 20:51

Secondly, I'm wondering your principal sounds pretty amazing. And as the chair of the board you no doubt will have already heard you've had quite A bit more communication with the principal than the board has recently. But I'm just wondering what your board and what you are putting in place to really support the principal during this period.

Jocelyn Furlan 21:09

So that was the tenor of the conversation. The board meeting last night was we don't want to interfere but how can we help? I have fortnightly meetings with the principal, which go very well and

just gives her a chance to share what anything that she wants to share. And as well as give me an update, one of the things we've been doing of recent times and it's not specifically related to the corona virus, but it worked particularly well. The first time we did it at a meeting last year was we read the principal's report, which is all about the activities of the school, which is great, but then the conversation is what are the three things that she's the most proud of in the last month. And what are the three things that are keeping her awake at night? The conversation yesterday last night on the coronavirus was, what is the thing that you're the most worried about in this kind of arms and can we assist in any way? The other thing I think I went in to live Last night's board meeting with a lens that we have nine board directors that there would be nine reactions to the corona virus, I needed to give the directors time to reflect on their own reactions to what was going on. So we have people who have been massively impacted by the corona virus, we have someone who works in events, who basically made all this stuff redundant. We have who works in hospitality, and they're facing a huge issue, myself and others less affected. And I don't have any children at school anymore. So I don't have a physical issue that we have some parents who have would have a face challenge. I had a real focus on making sure that as chair, that I let the other board directors have space to come to this from their own individual. And it's one of those issues because it's a crisis where there's 180 degrees between one person's reaction and other person's reaction. And I think one of this, one of the important things for a chair is to be mindful that not everybody thinks like you and not everybody react. Like you and it's at something like this, if you want buy into the decisions that the principal's making when it's an operational issue, it's really important to let the directors come to it themselves. So another interesting conversation we had last night, sorry, we're talking all about stress, kind of. But another interesting conversation we had last night is to sign up whether we sign up to the national redress scheme, which is of sexual abuse. So there were two really important things to me about this signing up to redress scheme. One is that history must show that we took it really seriously and gave serious consideration to the issue. And then secondly, what the decision was, which is actually the least important of the three but certainly what the communication is around the decision. We had the lawyer Arya lawyer and the head of because we're about to score, we're insured by the Baptist insurance. We had the CEO both they both came and spoke at the last board meeting, and a paper prepared we got some research about what other schools were doing and then we sat with it for a month and made a decision about it last night. And we had one director who disagreed with the decision. And she spoke about why she disagreed with the decision, the decision is to opt in. And the main risk of opting in is that you get a spurious claim against a current teacher. And that's a terrible thing. And so she spoke about that. And then what was great was the other directors responded with their own thoughts about it all to the point where we made a unanimous decision. I think the importance of listening when people disagree and not reacting when they say not that this would necessarily happen, but say, I disagree morally, that's a very hard thing to argue against. If someone says, morally, I can agree with this. You take that on board, but the other directors nevertheless said, I hear you. This is why I can agree to this. It was a really good conversation and dissident conversations are really important because you make better decisions when you have certain conversations. And I'm so grateful that that our board at Strathcona people feel free to say I disagree with this and I morally disagree with this. And this is why And then other directors will step in to help the person get where they need to be.

Helga Svendsen 25:05

I could not agree more. I think, in fact, I think a board that agrees on everything is a red flag. Absolutely. You need that dissident conversation that you need tension, as long as it's healthy tension. And all of what I'm hearing from you is that that was an incredibly constructive conversation, and possibly constructive because there was disagreement, not in spite of the disagreement.

Jocelyn Furlan 25:26

I completely agree. And because it made us we then had to think a bit deeper about it.

Helga Svendsen 25:30

It is a great thing. Yeah, all of the evidence around diversity and diversity of uses. That's exactly the case it tests you more. It makes you nervous about making the right decision in a very constructive and positive way and really sounds to me, all credit to you in as the chair of the board. We all know that the chair really sets the scene and the culture in that boardroom. And everything I'm hearing from you is that that organization and that board is very fortunate to have you in the chair

I think you've been too kind. Well, let's see what the listeners say about that. I think I know what they're gonna say it just sounds extraordinary. Oh, my goodness, we haven't even started on the other stuff, Jocelyn. And quite frankly, I don't intend to today because I think all of what we have talked about will just be so incredibly valuable for people, even if things have moved on in the next week. Some of those lessons and the way you have developed the team in the boardroom, but building on what has already been done and supporting your CEO, just incredibly helpful. Oh, my gosh, you must have been exhausted at the end of the board meeting yesterday. I was a bit tired. Like, you know, not one, but two very, you know, very meaty topics. Yeah, incredible. So and, and again, the thing I've heard in there about really that care, you know, you're talking about care for the community. And what I'm really hearing also is care for the board, you know, giving space for people to talk about how they feel But also about the different positions incredibly valuable for all of us in thinking about how to cope with the crisis. Wow, I don't quite know how you're going to sum this up. But we've had such a fabulous conversation. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Jocelyn Furlan 27:18

I think the most important attribute of a board director or board chair is self awareness and compassion and generosity of spirit for your fellow board directors. And kind of looking back to my, my experience when I was seven, everything that happens to us in particular, the adverse events are opportunities to learn. And I think it sounds a bit cliché, but I really think that if I'm feeling

uncomfortable about something or if someone's feeling uncomfortable about something, it's really worse if you want to be the chair of a board or even on a board to unpack why and learn from it, rather than dismissing it. So I don't embrace being uncomfortable. I don't embrace these difficult decisions we have to make and I really had to prepare myself emotionally and strategically and intellectually for the board meeting last night you couldn't just, it's a terrible phrase, but you can just slip in and expecting it. But the outcomes are better decisions for the people that you have custodial care for. And when I say custodian that you are the governor's office, because you're on board, so better decision making because people feel safe. Yeah.

Helga Svendsen 28:24

Amazing. Yeah, I think that is a beautiful takeaway message for all of us in dealing not just with our boards and governance issues, but our communities and each other and our neighbors and our families and everybody. Jocelyn, thank you so much for your time today. My pleasure. I will absolutely get you back to talk about those other issues at a future time. And if I can also just do a shout out to the fabulous Sonia law. who heard you speak at a conference Gosh, almost 12 months ago and sent me a message immediately saying I've just heard Jocelyn field and speak at a conference and she's fantastic. You should get her on the board. Finally, he We are and, you know, in some ways, even though it's taken us a while to get here, in some ways the timing could not be better because I think what you've shared will be just of incredible value to our community. So thank you so much for so openly sharing and sharing your wisdom with the community today on the podcast.

Jocelyn Furlan 29:16

It's a pleasure. Thank you.