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SPEAKERS

Julie Bignell, Helga Svendsen

H Helga Svendsen 00:07
Welcome to the Take on Board podcast where we talk all things boards and governance. I'm your host, Helga Svendsen. I know that being on a board can be interesting, valuable and exciting. Yet it can also be lonely, challenging, and really hard. Here at take on board will bring you weekly tips, tricks and advice to help you navigate your way onto your first or your next board and to help you build your governance wisdom. It's your community of trusted advisors who talk to women who have been made dumber and together, we'll discover what we need to take on board to be our best. Today on the Take on Board podcast, we're going to unravel some of the mysteries of being an effective board member. I'll be speaking with Julie. Julie is the Deputy Chair of Care Super, director of the Australian Council of Superannuation Investors, and a Director at Austin health. And she's formerly been a director of the North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation, and Workplace Health and Safety Queensland. Julie's an experienced committee chair and she's chaired committees on risk corporate governance, member and community engagement and human resources and industrial relations issues. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Julie.

J Julie Bignell 01:24
Thank you very much, Helga.



Helga Svendsen 01:26

So Julie, before we delve into being an effective board member, we'd love to just learn a bit more about you. So I'm wondering if you can tell me what young Julie was like. And when you got your first inkling that you might end up as a board director?



Julie Bignell 01:40

Well, young Julie grew up in a regional tanning Queensland for a very working class background. And I think I would not have known what a board was until, you know, high school and you start learning about these things in the citizenship education, as it was called back then, I don't think I really had an inkling at all about how organizations ran effectively, until I got into the workforce at the age of 15 or 16, I guess, working at Coles as a checkout chick. And I think my understanding of boards and how organizations work really came from their lived experience of working as a workout understanding where you were in I think the power structure of an organization, your place in and how things got done, and how your issues got addressed.



Helga Svendsen 02:37

What was the first board that you saw?



Julie Bignell 02:40

The first board that I saw?



Helga Svendsen 02:42

Or witnessed



Julie Bignell 02:44

in a physical sense?



Helga Svendsen 02:45

No as in as had a sense of ...



Julie Bignell 02:48

Have a sense of? Well, I think the first time I really understood the role of boards was when I went to work at a company called Energex, which used to be SEQEB, the old electricity distributor in Queensland. And I joined after they had been a really big dispute in Queensland, and people will remember the 80s, the early 80s, was a very tumultuous time in Queensland. And that sense of the disputation between the workers in that company and the way that management and the board had dealt with their issues, really highlighted to me how important it was that the people who are in the decision making roles had a way of understanding what was going on in the organization, and had a plan to deal with what happened in a crisis. And what happened after a crisis with your own workforce in particular.

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Helga Svendsen 03:52

Oh, this is meant to just be the intro, but I want to delve into that. So what did happen with that board and their communication with the workforce, you know, before, during, and after?

J

Julie Bignell 04:02

My observation as a worker at that point was that, you know, workplace relations in that place was like an open sore for many, many years after the dispute had been resolved. And, you know, they really, to me, as a cog in that wheel, I didn't see that there was a plan in place, to reengage with the workforce, and to try to heal some of the divisions and some of the really terrible interpersonal issues that had broken out during that time. So I think, you know, that's not an example that I would say, was a successful example. And I think that's probably a timing thing, too. I mean, in the 80s, I think a board work very differently to the way that boards work now, didn't necessarily get involved in strategy, certainly not issues around work for strategy and engagement with workers and even the public, really. So I think the role of boards has changed a lot over the last few decades, hopefully.

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Helga Svendsen 05:10

So you think that was more an event almost around the management of the organization, rather than the governance of the organization?

J

Julie Bignell 05:17

Yeah. And I think back then boards were far more likely to accept that management ran the organization, you know, and that they were the board was more concerned about

taking off on things from a compliance perspective, being seen to provide oversight, but I think not necessarily engaged in a way that influenced the outcome or the trajectory of the organization in many parts of the operation.

H

Helga Svendsen 05:47

It's always an interesting line, isn't it for boards around what is a management responsibility? What's the operation? And what's the governance side? Do you have a kind of a rule of thumb about what that might be for another organization?

J

Julie Bignell 06:01

I think this is a constant in a debate that goes on in most directors minds today is how far should I go? In my questioning and in my request for information? And it is difficult, because I think as a director, you need to understand the business sufficiently that you can ask the right questions. But, you know, sometimes people get caught up on detail, that is not a good, good way of spending the board's time. So I think sometimes, directors need to take issues offline, if you really don't understand what you're talking about. But it's an issue that's not going to affect the outcome of the conversation you're having. I have found that management is always happy to take directors through that aspect of the business so you can have a deeper understanding. So I think it's a judgment call, not just about, do I need to understand this particular detail for the outcome of this conversation. But also, do I have a right to take up the board's time with diving off down this particular road?

H

Helga Svendsen 07:12

Yeah. And that, I mean judgment is, of course, a key skill for members. But judgment in one circumstance might not be the same judgement in another.

J

Julie Bignell 07:21

It's different every time I think. And often, you do depend on other Directors or the Chair of that meeting, to steer it back to the key issues.

H

Helga Svendsen 07:31

In fact, one of the things I wanted to ask you about in terms of being an effective board member, given your experiences a Chair, what have you seen work well, from other Chairs, or what have you felt has worked well, in your role as the Chair?



Julie Bignell 07:44

Well, I think, as I become a more experienced director, I really appreciate the value of preparation, before a meeting. And when I say preparation, I don't mean looking over the agenda that management has put together and deciding on how much time you're spending on talking about things I'm talking about. Well, before that meeting, talking to management, and reviewing, we're up to in your, you know, your planning of your committee or your or your board, to make sure that the right things around the agenda in the first place. And that management understands the kind of information that is required for the members of the committee to make the decision. And if you spend a lot of time on that, it's usually worthwhile, because you'll get really focused, productive meeting out of that, as opposed to people picking holes with the way that a pipe has been put together, saying to management, well, what do you really want us to do with this information, or thanks for the information? So what? How does this fit in with the role of the committee and all the other distractions that you can you can get from not having the right structure of information in front of you. So so my vote is for developing a good arrangement, a good relationship with your managers that are inputting into the committee papers, first up, and putting the work in as the chair to make sure that you have presented the meeting in such a way that people can do something with it.



Helga Svendsen 09:23

I do a lot of work as a facilitator of workshops. And I feel like it's a similar role in some ways as a chair. And whenever I'm working with clients around it, there is as much work that goes into a meeting or workshop or wherever it may be beforehand, as there is in it. And sometimes people were a little surprised by that. But it's doing exactly that: getting all of the information right, getting the questions right, getting the timing right, those sorts of things,



Julie Bignell 09:48

I actually do see myself more as a facilitator, then trying to control something, I mean, yes, of course, you have to control a meeting in a sense of making sure it's productive, but you really trying to facilitate an outcome.



Helga Svendsen 10:02

And so in the running of the meeting, what are the sorts of things that you do to facilitate that engagement with the group, the board, the committee, whatever it may be?



Julie Bignell 10:11

I think you need to develop a relationship with your committee members where they will accept that you might say to them sometimes, can you rephrase that question? To make it more about the strategy or the outcome was seeking, rather than a question about the details that you've just asked, you know, so you've got to value the questions that people are asking. But you need to not allow the meeting to be taken up with questions that are probably going to take you down, you know, an alternate route and not get an outcome. And that's really hard, because sometimes people ask questions that on the face of it might not sound like a reasonable question. But the premise behind it valuable. And so you have to allow people enough will leeway to develop their own thoughts in a meeting and to phrase the concerns or the questions in the right way. But you know, you don't want to cut people off unnecessarily either. And I think that relationship issue is very important that committee members except that when you're trying to get the best out of them with their participation, you're not trying to shut them down. You are, you're actually trying to facilitate an outcome.



Helga Svendsen 11:35

Yeah, and there is often different ways of processing information, different ways of asking questions of people in the room, and somehow bringing all of that together.



Julie Bignell 11:43

Yeah, I think have to accept you're not always going to get that right. But as long as there's goodwill around the table.



Helga Svendsen 11:49

Yeah. So building trust with people. How do you do that. And again, if you're a Committee Chair, or Board Chair, or even just a member of the Board, what are some of the tips and tricks that you've done to build that relationship, that rapport and that trust with your co directors?



Julie Bignell 12:04

I think there needs to be work put into having a common expectation, everybody has to understand the path that we're on, and I think agree in a sense that they willing to participate in a certain way. And so some of the work that I've done on one of my boards lately has been participating with getting all of the Chairs of our committees together,

and really unpacking with them, how I manage the not only the dynamics of management, and the committee and what people's roles ought to be, but also how to facilitate good decisions coming out of those committee meetings. So, again, I think it comes back to your willingness to put the time in to engage with people, and not making assumptions about what's going on in people's heads. Because some of the worst meetings I've been to, or try to Chair have been the ones that everyone's been in a bit of a hurry. And, you know, you kind of knew that someone had a niggling concern about something, but you didn't put the time into thinking about how that was going to be dealt with. Because your time is precious, and you you had a deadline or whatever. And usually those things don't get very those occasions to work out very well. And that's hard, because a lot of people these days, don't have a lot of time. But when you're charged with running a meeting and getting an outcome, you really don't have the luxury of ignoring what you what you really know deep down is going to be an issue that needs to be addressed.

H

Helga Svendsen 13:43

So I know one of the other things that you feel is important around being a really effective board member, and being able to discharge that role, I guess, as a effective board member is around the flow of information and effective flow of information. So can you talk to me about what that means?

J

Julie Bignell 13:59

Well, I think what that means to me is developing a culture and agreement between the board and managers who are contributing to board papers about how information is presented. So obviously, it needs to be concise and relevant. But I've seen many papers where the recommendation is the board night the report. Sometimes that's a 50 page paper. And so, you know, you spend a couple of hours reading this thinking about these, and then you go, Oh, note, the report,

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Helga Svendsen 14:38

You get to page 49. And they say, "we'll now note",

J

Julie Bignell 14:40

yeah. And so what am I going to do with that was my opportunity to contribute any of my experience to that? Or even ask a question? Really, if you just want me to to note, what you're telling me then, you know, it's kind of been a bit of a waste of time. So I think an agreement around why information is being presented is good, and Chairs can help in

that. But also, I think requiring papers is to have a purpose, clearly set out, right, the very beginning, template, page checklist, whatever. How does this relate to our strategic plan? How does it relate to our risks? How does it relate to any other business on the agenda at the moment? And what do you want us to do with it? Sometimes what management want you to do with a piece of information is not what you end up doing, of course. But I think you need to be in the right frame of mind when you start reading something too. And you need to know how much time to allocate to really thinking about a paper. If it's just background material, just say it's background material maybe don't put it in the board pack, you know, send it separately. So I think that's important. But I always want to know what other things were considered. So here's the recommendation. That's fine. You've taken me through how you back that up. But what else did you consider and more with those other recommendations, all of those other options discarded?

H

Helga Svendsen 16:04

And thinking about - I know you're on the board of one of the hospitals, Austin health? And so thinking about that flow of information, can you talk me through how consumers are involved in that information flow? Just before like, what's a consumer? How do you define it? Yeah, okay.

J

Julie Bignell 16:19

Well, so this is interesting. It's a label, isn't it? And there's a bit of debate at the moment about what a consumer is, what a consumer representative is, anywhere, it's difficult to represent other people, I think, in the health sector is very difficult to tell someone that they are representative of a particular group. So I think be kind of starting to move away from that, and considering people to be leaders, influences rather than or partners rather than representatives, which is quite a passive, one way kind of concept, when you think about it, that's the other half of consumer rep. But in terms of consumer, I guess, I think it's still somebody who is dependent upon a service that you're providing. And again, it's a term that doesn't really pick up sufficiently, I think, on the understanding that that person's life is going to be changed by that service that you're providing. And if you are to provide a proper service to that person, they have to be involved right at the beginning in the design of that service side that the needs are actually made. It's not just a transaction. It's a collaboration, really. And that is the why that collaborative consumer engagement is heading in the public health sector. And I think that's really, really exciting. Fantastic. And a huge amount of work is going in across the board. And that and particularly at the Austin health service on, I'm very excited about being involved in in that piece of work.



Helga Svendsen 17:58

And so how are they engaged in work are in the governance, we're an example of at the Austin how they're involved in the governance work.



Julie Bignell 18:05

We have a Consumer Advisory Committee or community advisory committee, depending on who you talk with. And recently, we elevated the views of that committee into our strategic planning process. Through the board, sorry, that committee is a subcommittee of the board and has a few board members on it, as well as consumer and compassionate community reps, that what we decided to do was to consult during from the very beginning during the development of the strategic plan so that when we had the final product, there was an alignment between what consumers thought was important as a whole in its entirety for the health service to the factoring in in their forward plan. But also that then the work that the consumer committee had to plan out the next five years as well, that dovetailed into the key areas that we knew the resources and thought were going to be put into in the health service. And that means that, that committees work can be relevant and important, going forward with with the entire strategic plan.



Helga Svendsen 19:16

Fantastic. It's so good to hear of organizations that are really engaging with their people, whoever their people might be, whether its consumers, patients, community, but really bringing that into that strategic level. level,



Julie Bignell 19:30

I think the the culture at the Austin is amazing, already, but continually evolving, and what's really fantastic to see is that clinicians and administrators bring their projects, or their thoughts or ideas, questions to consumers. First, the design phase. And pretty much all of our committees now around designing services, or even infrastructure, involve consumer representation. So that we get it right in the first place. And people in the in the health service employed in health service actually want to know, they actually see it as valuable as highly valued. You know, there's a lineup of people who want to make presentations to the consumers and get their thoughts on things. And I think that's going to result in some improved outcomes for people in the community.



Helga Svendsen 20:21

Shifting slightly and thinking about engagement in the boardroom. And board members

who are sometimes a bit more passive, and sometimes a bit more engaged. I'm just wondering if you can give us some tips on getting attention in the boardroom?



Julie Bignell 20:37

Yes, well, apart from wearing the funny hair, or around your Richmond scarf, which I've done occasionally,



Helga Svendsen 20:43

whatever,



Julie Bignell 20:44

I do get pulled up for that. Look, I think it can be really intimidating when you first come onto a board, because you're you're trying to engage with a group of people that often have known each other for years. And you're trying to get in sync with the vibe, the vibe of the organization, what the key issues are, and it can be really difficult to get the courage up to just ask a question, I think what I still do even today is make sure that I do not go to a meeting without a question to ask, and try to get it in in the first sort of quarter of the meeting. Because if you do that people notice you and they will look at you during the meeting, expecting you to say something. Because if you just sit there passively, people think you're a rock, you know, they won't even look at you and you shut out of that really vital interpersonal communication process. So I think, find something to say first up, even if it's to chat, in the five minutes before the meeting starts, make sure people know you're there. I think women in particular can be a bit intimidated, sometimes when, when there's a bit of a wouldn't say a fight, you know, when there's a robust conversation going on. And again, I think we need to push ourselves to make sure that were relevant, because most people, not everyone gets paid for going to board meetings, but most people get paid to get to board meetings and you're there on false pretenses if you think you can just read your papers and sit there like an egg for the whole meeting. You really are. And if that's all that you want to contribute, then you should probably think about doing something else. Find a thing that interests you on the agenda, that you think that you can ask a meaningful question. And if you can't think of any meaningful questions to ask them, maybe again, you might not have the right pair of shoes on.



Helga Svendsen 22:35

It's another conversation all in itself, which we won't cover today. But I would love to cover at some stage around Yeah, getting off the board. You know, when you've given your

contribution, sometimes an organization might be in a particular phase, and you've made your contribution. And when it's time to get off the board. Asking questions is one of those key skills for board member. And if there's nothing in there that is prompting that it might be time to move on? Or just have made having the courage and the bravery to open your mouth and ask those questions.



Julie Bignell 23:04

Yes. And that might mean you say to the chair, I don't understand some of this subject matter. Can I have a bit of an induction into this subject with a couple of managers and I've never met a chair or a CEO of an organization that wasn't happy to accommodate a request from a particularly a new board member to induct them and give them a bit of background so that they can participate.



Helga Svendsen 23:28

Indeed, sometimes those inverted commas stupid questions that get asked early on are the questions that everybody else around the board as well. So sometimes it's not taken off line. Let's deal with that now, because everybody else wants to know it too.



Julie Bignell 23:41

always and and the other thing that I've noticed is that, particularly if you're new to a board, you might ask the question that nobody else has thought about, because they've kind of gotten into a little bit of a groupthink situation, and it just doesn't occur to them. And when you ask that question, they, it will cause people sometimes to reevaluate all of these assumptions that they based their views on. So it can be really valuable, and a good board will really value getting those kinds of questions.



Helga Svendsen 24:09

Yeah, just like good management really appreciate getting those good questions as well, that would much rather than just everybody going, yep, that's fine. Move on. Absolutely. We've covered a whole bunch of stuff here, kind of the operational versus governance, chairing a good meeting, preparing for meetings, the flow of information, getting attention in the boardroom, what are the key takeaways that you want people to take from this conversation?



Julie Bignell 24:32

I think my my key objective would be to say to people value your contribution. Value, the questions that you have to ask, you don't have to have the answers to those questions. When you ask them, you're not required to have the answers before the conversation, you're required to be able to ask questions to come up with an outcome. And that will be a collective outcome. So it's not on you to walk into a boardroom with a fixed view, it's on you to think about the breadth of the discussion and how you can contribute and form your view during the meeting, based on the conversation, and the key points that come out of it. So value, your contribution, I think, is important. I think the other thing I would say is respect diversity of views. If you're in a meeting, and everybody agrees, I think that's a problem. Sometimes on simple issues, it'll it'll, you know, the solution will be clear. But other times if if nobody's asking or presenting any different information, I think that's a problem. And particularly if you're only getting information from management from a particular perspective, you have to say, Where else could we get information to provide us with context on this decision? Have we really got all the information in front of us? And this is highlighted to me through my work with consumers particularly, and working member based organizations? Yes, you can't survey everybody on everything. We're not in Switzerland. But you know, there's got to be an adequate amount of research put into your decision making process, and particularly the demographic that a fix you've got to think about. And I think this is an issue that we see even in politics at the moment, you know, when you look at issues like a women's budget, you know, or running a lens over a policy to say, Okay, how does this policy affect this particular demographic, and people jump up and down sigh Oh, you can't do that, you know, this meant to apply to everybody. But society is diverse, and you making decisions about all sorts of people. And when you're on a board, you're doing the same thing. So if your decision is only geared towards a particular demographic, then you're not doing the right thing by the people that rely on your service, nor are you doing the right thing on the back of your shareholders.



Helga Svendsen 27:02

So I'm wondering if you've got a resource that you'd like to share with the community - a podcast, a book, a TED talk, what might be something you'd recommend for the Take on Board community to have a look at?



Julie Bignell 27:15

It's not exciting, and many people have already read it. I think that the Prudential inquiry into the CBA, I think, is mandatory reading for all directors, whether you're in a for profit, not for profit, whatever industry you're in, I think you should read it, because the way that

they issues have been set out, and particularly how the flow of information gets to board members, and what are the expectations on directors, when you're making decisions, I think is being put out in an extremely useful, effective way. It's not hard to read. It's not that long, either. It's categorized by issue. So you can you can just read the stuff that you're interested in. But I think it's one of the most effective pieces of information that I've seen for a long time.

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Helga Svendsen 28:08

Excellent. I'm not sure I'll put a link to that in the show notes, so people can find it easily. Excellent. And finally, being a good board member, I think is taking on different actions. So what are two or three actions you can suggest, for our listeners to take on to be a more effective board member.

J

Julie Bignell 28:27

I think diary management is really important, the worst thing you can do is get to the day before a board meeting and realize that you haven't finished reading your board papers, or you haven't had time to think about it. So diary management with a view to leaving enough time not just to read the papers, but to think about it. Because often, and this is my second tip, often you've got questions that you can ask before you get to the meeting. And if you don't ask them before the meeting in some way, shape, or form and just email management and say, Can you give me you know, x y z, you're going to end up coming to the meeting without the full information, you'll have a question in your head. And it might be a question about detail that you think is not sufficient to raise in the meeting. Because you think it might make you look silly, or whatever. So you don't ask it. And so you put in a situation where you're calling end up going with the flow rather than having all the information you need. So my other tip is, get the information that you need, if you think you can before the meeting. So when you turn up, you do have all the information.

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Helga Svendsen 29:37

Beautiful. Thank you. Thank you for your time today and sharing those pearls of wisdom with our community and sharing a bit of a history of governance from the 80s to now. Fantastic to hear.

J

Julie Bignell 29:48

now everyone knows how old I am.



Helga Svendsen 29:51

Thank you.



Julie Bignell 29:51

Thank you pleasure.