



Take on Board

# Transcript – Rochelle Courtenay

**Helga Svendsen 0:00**

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Rochelle Courtenay about being a founder of an organisation and managing director of that organisation about board meetings and surrounding yourself with the right skills and strengths. First, let me tell you about Rochelle. Rochelle is Share the Dignity's Founder and Managing Director. The title she's most proud of though is Pad Lady. Rochelle has led a team of volunteers collecting around two and a half million sanitary products across Australia. When she first learned of homeless women going without basic sanitary items during the menstrual cycle, she decided the question was not Why is no one doing anything but rather what's stopping me from doing something or not 2015 Rochelle took matters into her own hands and started collecting sanitary items with her local community and distributing to the local shelters. As a result, a simple idea of giving dignity to women share the dignity was created and has grown. To a national charity. It has over 5000 volunteers Australia wide and most noteworthy provides multiple initiatives aimed at giving dignity to women. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Rochelle.

**Rochelle Courtenay 1:12**

Thank you. I'm honored to be here.

**Helga Svendsen 1:15**

It is fabulous to have you here. And I'm really looking forward to talking through, surrounding yourself with those skills and strengths and how to get the right board. But before we do that, can I just speak a little bit deeper about you? Tell me, what was your earliest experience of governance.

**Rochelle Courtenay 1:33**

I will tell you that when I first started Share the Dignity I didn't know that we needed to be a Registered Charity have a board of directors have a constitution have license and permits in every state. So I was very, very new to the whole gamut of what did need to be to be a charity. So setting it to use the first board that I've ever been on. And to me, it's a little bit like I've played netball my whole life. So in order to have a Really good netball team you have to have a real diversity in skill sets across that netball team. And I've also coached netball for my whole life really my whole life since I think I started coaching when I was 12. Young girls who were eight so for me, it was that same sort of mindset was just surrounding myself with Hey, I needed a go shooter, I needed a goalkeeper I

needed to make sure I had a center. And in that I had to really just use my passion to get these amazing people to come on board. I knew that there wasn't anyone who didn't believe that women deserve to have access to the very basic of essential So building that very first board was not hard. And I even say now we're probably at a third stage board. You know, when you go out looking for the skill set that you need the world or you know, your dreams or just come to fruition when you just reach out to some incredible people and they go Yeah, absolutely. I will. I will make my mark and someone to avoid so your first question is just how did I come across But what experience I had nothing but I did have, you know, a lifetime of being on a team to bring that to the plate.

### **Helga Svendsen 3:09**

It is such a beautiful analogy using the nipple team and needing all of those different skills of you know, goal keeper and wing attack and center and so on. So then thinking about your board, what were the skills and the strengths? What What was it that the center needed? What was it the wing attack needed? What were the skills and strengths that you needed on your board to make your organization a success?

### **Rochelle Courtenay 3:30**

Yeah, well, I always think of myself as the Center. So I've got to make sure that the ball can go up and down the court in the first place, but I needed I knew that I needed to have legal, so I needed to have somebody who had that legal representation. I needed to have an accountant, I needed to have an account somebody who was an accountant, I needed to make sure that I had somebody who had some PR and marketing experience as well. But then the other piece is when I very first started with just people who shared that really strongly. Passion and that entrepreneurship. So I knew I am the sort of person who doesn't do no. So if I start surrounding myself by all those people, that people who were really risk adverse, we would not have the charity that we have right now, which is a very different board to what we have now. Right? And in that you still have to have that good balance of people who are rich, who are not risk takers, and then that entrepreneurial people who will I ever, there's a way around that kind of thing.

### **Helga Svendsen 4:29**

So, so tell me about the transitions because it is, you know, for a new organisation, it starts with an idea and somebody takes that idea. And then you turn into a startup organization, and then you go through growth. Tell me about the transitions of the organisation and how that's been reflected in the board and what that meant at the board table.

**Rochelle Courtenay 4:48**

Yeah, I think the first round of boards, everybody was a friend. Everybody was somebody that you as somebody that knew them closely, and that was surrounding yourself with people. Who you knew and you had worked with before, right? So friendships were there. And in reflection, everybody had a really important role in getting us to be the team that we are today. But at certain times, you've got to go on the interchange event so that you can go forward and put your next best team on, right. Sorry about my sports analogies. I'm an apple fan. I'm missing it desperately. So when I say that, I say that we had an accountant on our board, who was a local accountant, when we grew into this massive charity that had a million dollars worth of donations. Every year, we had to just grow into another accountant who could come a treasurer who came on our board, who had further skill sets than that. Yeah. And now I look at our board that we now are in and we've now got another Treasurer on our board, who has really wealth of experience in a non profit charities. So taking us to another level so we're just going up in grades of what what network game we're playing what You know, as I were playing Hmm.

**Helga Svendsen 6:03**

And have you found as your organisation has kind of morphed into bigger and better and brighter, has there been new skills that you've needed to needed to bring on.

**Rochelle Courtenay 6:13**

New skills and at certain stages, you know, like we needed to have a whole heap of risk and policies and procedures. And so we needed to bring that skill set in which, you know, I never believed even existed at the very beginning and nor did the people that we were surrounded ourselves back then, you know, like there was, there's always those bits of the beginning of any journey of a charity or business at the end of the day, show dignity as a business, but we're in the business of helping women. If we don't run our business the same way as people do a business and we won't be around and we won't be able to help. So the charity has always been built on it is a business. And the fact that we are a charitable business is a bonus. Yeah, for me, it was always about building a house that had sustainability. So how did we That first board, we really just laid the foundations that we had, which was kind of at that two year, Mark, which is, you know, in our Constitution that we have new board members every two years, which is sometimes really hard to say goodbye to really good board members, you know, and but I think that it also comes with a new passion and new people that come with different ideas and people who then look at things in a different way. Sometimes, you know, people, you just get in the way, and that's great, because that's what we did. But now we've got another board who come on board, who look at things about why you're doing it that way. Well, we're doing it that way, because that's the way we do it. So it's good to have that transition as much as it would be great to have some of the board on that was still on at the very beginning. It's great to have new fresh eyes on board.

**Helga Svendsen 7:48**

I confess I'm a big fan of maximum terms on boards, although can I just check, did I hear right that in your constitution is your maximum term two years?

**Rochelle Courtenay 7:57**

Yes, yes. In that same position, but we've you know, think that except for my position on the board as the founder. That's what we had said that we would like to do.

**Helga Svendsen 8:10**

So talk me through that. Because like I say, I'm a big fan of turnover board and I agree wholeheartedly about fresh eyes and fresh energy and those sorts of things. Two years is a pretty short period of time. Can you talk me through the thinking around them?

**Rochelle Courtenay 8:24**

Wow, get in make some impact, and off you go. I say, all our board volunteers, I would say there is a shelf life of all volunteers and for a board we really take on a legal, we have to make sure that we do great work to be able to have a sustainable charity. And while we respect that we've got five and a half thousand volunteers. What we do is really important to them to the women who need us we just need to make sure that we get in there and we do the best job that we can and that I don't even want to say use your time because it is it's like a one of our boys giving up their most the most valuable thing that they have, which is their time, their expertise. So I would rather use that to the best of its ability for two years then to have half heartedly for five. Yeah. So I just think that that's the best way to move forward.

**Helga Svendsen 9:14**

You know, as the founder of the organisation, and you're on the board of the organisation, and you'd said at the start about how, oh, this board stuff, who knew that we needed to have a board and what we need to have in place? So as the founder, how did you find it when the board came on? Because you would then need to share decision making and share strategic direction and those sorts of things with the board. How did you kind of cope with that? And how did the board code coming on and sharing that with you as well?

**Rochelle Courtenay 9:41**

Yeah, look, I am probably one of the people who will I will just suck every ounce of information from other people. I've that's who I've had to be I've never done logistics either. But I've learned how to do logistics of how to, you know, pick up a pallet of products from Virginia to get out to do it, I just had to learn how to do that. But I've had to surround myself with amazing people that can teach me what it is I need to know. But I also know how to bend my knees and push the ball through the hoop. But I don't need to shoot those hoops all the time, right? So I surround myself with amazing people who I trust can do what they have signed up and said that they would do and that's no different to start, right. So when a board member comes on board, there's real clarity. Now, there wasn't clarity at the beginning. So don't for a second think that I knew what I was doing at the beginning. And I don't believe that first board really knew what we were doing. We were just doing the best that we could do. And I say that there was never any mistakes by share the DVD, because we just did what we thought was right at the time would have been different. Absolutely. But it was never wrong. It just could have probably been done better.

**Helga Svendsen 10:49**

And so in developing that clarity around, you know what it was bad hat how did how did you do that? How did you develop the clarity around roles and responsibilities and those sorts of things?

**Rochelle Courtenay 10:59**

Yeah. We had our last chair who was Susan pants was just a kick ass woman who literally, you know, spent her whole work life in leadership and coaching. And so she really led that charge of, you know, what is it that we want from our board and if you're not gonna, you know, able to do that, then possibly you're not meant to be on our board. So she made really clear what we needed people to sign up and to do, and just put some real processes in that place. And I think that's a little bit different to how I was just grateful anyone was able to help me. So I think you know, I learned so much from Susan and the team that we ended up getting surrounded by us but there was also that clarity starting to come in and we know that we have that now in this very new board that we now have with new people having come on board that we know exactly what we send them you know, there's a full process for exactly how a new board member comes on board and what their expectations are and hand on heart say that that was not made Who did that? That was our Last year, surrounding yourself with good people is what creates great results. Right?

**Helga Svendsen 12:05**

Yeah, absolutely. And as you say, being very clear about what those expectations are. So in those expectations, it sounds like you've got an induction process now in place, you know, that onboarding or bringing the board members on and getting clear around expectations? What does that look like?

What are the expectations for your board members look like? And how do they come on? How do you bring them onto a board?

**Rochelle Courtenay 12:29**

First of all, our expectations for each board member is different because they all have different roles, right? So obviously, we have six board meetings a year. We have a strategic planning weekends, once a year. So they're the things that are that we ask for your time to be committed. But we also ask that you at least give us one hour every week to be making sure that you can check all emails and action anything if there's something that's urgent we need a 24 hour turnaround. So though, those reasons really clear things we did not have in the beginning. So sometimes we'd be waiting seven days for an answer, right. But also there's, you know, we have staff now, which enables us to have really well prepared board meeting packs and everything sent out 10 days in advance. We didn't have that at the beginning we were doing it winging it as we went, right? So it's very different now to what it was, we have a introduction if somebody is wanting to come onto our board, you can head to our website, it's it's gives you an application form where everything gets sent through then once every board meeting will sit through those and look at is that, you know, we'll we'll go back and respond and say there isn't something right now or there is something right now. And then it's a dating process, ultimately, because having the right people around you is all about culture. So whether that's staff or pay for your shares and heroes are our volunteers. It's all about culture. It's all about having people in believe and treat people and acting in a way that you're happy to be around that. And that doesn't mean that people who have a different way of thinking are not good people that you just, you know, everyone just needs to have their own team members. We're all going for the same goal in the same direction. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, there's alignment really, isn't it? Yeah, it's key, right? You also need to like the people that you're around. Yes. Otherwise, you just can't hide that. If I wouldn't have a wine with you at the pub. I don't really want to play with you six times a year. Right? Do I need to be my best mate, but I think it's really important that you like the people that you surround yourself with.

**Helga Svendsen 14:41**

So you talked about culture, then how does culture show up with your board and in the boardroom?

**Rochelle Courtenay 14:49**

Well, you know, I always say that culture starts from the head down, right? So if the culture is not right up here, what is it going to do for our 5000 volunteers, so culture is The key to everything and it does it just takes one person to actually change the whole feeling of a room. Right? So I think that that culture is something that's so very, very important. And you know, we, you know, in reflection, we've had some people along the way where I've thought, huh, probably wouldn't do that again. But everyone comes along to teach you something in life. It's as simple as that.

**Helga Svendsen 15:30**

Well, and I always think it's interesting, this this balance really between wanting to like the people that you're in the boardroom with and having the right culture, yet at the same time, ensuring that you've got that right mix of skills, the diversity of skills, you know, you've got the goalkeeper, and you've got the wing defense and you've got the center. They're different. And sometimes those different skills bump up against each other in a way that's a bit difficult as well. So with your board as you've brought people together, how have you balanced stand out, keeping that right culture, keeping people wanting to be together yet at the same time valuing diversity.

**Rochelle Courtenay 16:07**

Well, I look at our chair now, Simon Tolhurst, who is a litigation lawyer, he couldn't be any more opposite me when it comes to how we talk, how we walk and do all of that sort of stuff. But if you sit down and you actually get to know, Simon, he has a heart bigger than flat, right? He just looks at things like a risk process, you know, he just has the same culture as me. treat people the way that you want to be treated yourself. And I think that's really, really important. You can gauge who people are, by the way that they will treat the cleanup or the wipe stuff, right. And that is really key to me because there is, especially in share the dignity and I look at it and I say our staff are not as important as our volunteers. Our board are not as important as our volunteers. We're all as important as each other. And there isn't one of us you should be getting a curtsy and another one you should be getting something done. You know what, I don't like that. So I think that for me is how I gauge people. And I think that's really important that skill set is certainly really important. But you could have the most amazing lawyer on your team. But if that grunting at a waiter was screaming at them, you don't want them. I don't want them on my team.

**Helga Svendsen 17:19**

You want that right mix of your skills, the hard skills, your finance people, your PR people, whatever it may be, but also you need that right? The right attributes, people that will treat people I mean, you're running an organisation called Share the Dignity. If you can't treat people with dignity, it's probably not going to be a strong fish.

**Rochelle Courtenay 17:37**

But that's my thing, right? Is that the fit with me is that I don't judge anybody, by the way that they look or what they do. You know, behind all of us, there is a story, just be open enough to want to hear that and not judge somebody.

**Helga Svendsen 17:53**

You know, behind everybody. There's a story. Has there been any stories of your board members, whether it's it sounds like you're in your family phase of your board there was the startup phase and then this growth board. And now this third phase board, but I'm just wondering with your board all along, has there been any stories in there that have surprised you?

**Rochelle Courtenay 18:10**

Ah, I am always surprised by how many have been touched by family violence, are they Why are you would never pick it. They don't speak openly about it. But when you sit down and you have a wine with them, and you're getting to date them, and you're getting to know them, you're you're here, how many of them have been touched by family and domestic violence? And that hits the core of why they volunteer that time? Hmm. That always shocks me.

**Helga Svendsen 18:41**

You can't pick who that might be. And it is so pervasive in our community, the proportion of people that have been impacted by family violence, so it stands to reason there has to be a number of us around that

**Rochelle Courtenay 18:53**

Like they come to make a difference because of what happens As well, do you know what I mean? Like this is their way of making a difference in the world.

**Helga Svendsen 19:05**

And so with your board, your your group of people that are there to make the difference in the world, which is not just your board, it's your staff. It's you, it's your staff, it's your volunteers, as you say, as you so beautifully put it, nobody needs to curtsy to the other. I love that. You're in your third phase now as the organization and the board would need. What's the next phase?

**Rochelle Courtenay 19:26**

"Oh, please COVID let us get through it" is our phase right now. Right. So, you know, as a charity and as a board out our real pace right now is to how do we have sustainability? How do we make sure that this house that we built does not get blown over by any economic climate, massive change what happens to us because people will need us so much more, yet people will be less able to donate. How do we as a board now, make sure that you know as a charity where you know, we classified



now as a big charity, you know, when I look at our board, I look at our stand up board, then our baby board. So we were, you know, in kindy, we're now at school, how do we make sure that we get to high school? Right, that we just keep moving forward doing the work that we do? How do we do that? That's our board's role now. And how do we keep growing as a charity that has had exponential growth in the last five years? I've always said things are really easy. Well, we're the fresh, fresh thing off the block, right? Because we were we were sparkling and new and no one had heard a period poverty and no one ever thought, oh my god, what would it be like to to be without sanitary items, but that's not new anymore for people. So how do we now have a charity that has that sustainability and continue to grow with good governance with good practices, I would have liked to have seen shepherding it to go worldwide. But right now that's on hold. Right now in COVID translate, we're just bringing it all back and just going straight to Back to sustainability in Australia, how do we make sure that we can just keep going doing and having the impact of the work that we have? Because I would hate to be the charity that is not around when we will be so much more than needed? Mm hmm.

**Helga Svendsen 21:14**

Absolutely. So, Rochelle, we have had such a marvellous conversation about those different phases of the organization and how governance has transitioned through them. What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

**Rochelle Courtenay 21:31**

Ah, surround yourself with amazing people, because that's when incredible things can happen, right? Trust that, that if you do that, then you you know, you all have a role to play on a board on a netbook or whatever it is. It's everybody has that role to play and you have to trust in them to be able to do that as well.

**Helga Svendsen 21:49**

And is there a resource that you would like to share with the take on board community?

**Rochelle Courtenay 21:54**

I have to share everybody must read me first from Kate Christie. So "The guilt free guide to prioritizing you" it is the most fabulous book and all of our staff. We have been doing time management training for about I did it for a good six week course with Take. And it was just life changing. So I just think that prioritizing and respecting your time is so very important because it's the only thing that we cannot buy or get more back or right.

**Helga Svendsen 22:24**

Absolutely. Which comes back to your earlier points around having your board members for two years and getting the time out of them and then they can move on and bring in somebody else with their time.

**Rochelle Courtenay 22:35**

Yeah, absolutely times the most important thing anyone can give to you as well.

**Helga Svendsen 22:39**

Absolutely. Excellent. Well, I'll make sure we put a copy of that in the show notes. Oh, Rochelle, thank you so much. It's been a fantastic conversation and hearing about your organisation, your your passion for it is it's obvious for the amazing work that you're doing. Thank you for being that person that instead of thinking who else should do something When I can do this, I can step up and do it. So thank you for all of your passion and enthusiasm. And thank you for sharing your governance wisdom with us today on take on board.

**Rochelle Courtenay 23:09**

Thank you.