



Take on Board

# Transcript – Moira Were

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Moira Were about the role of women and gender in the boardroom and in decision making. First, let me tell you about Moira. Moira is on the boards of Scope Global Pty Ltd. Oikumene Foundation, Hen House Co-op, which I looked up earlier and looks fascinating, and Collab4Good Pty Ltd. Her list of previous boards includes the Medical Board of South Australia, South Australia Fire and Emergency Services Commission, Southern Domestic Violence Service, Noarlunga Community Legal Services and Volunteering South Australia and Northern Territory. Moira has worked from the kitchen table to the cabinet table and started her board career as a 19 year old youth volunteer representative on the Service to Youth Council Board. She currently serves on the board of Scope Global board and is a ministerial appointment to the entrepreneurship advisory board in South Australia. Moira received an AM, Order of Australia in 2019, for her community service to South Australia. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast Moira.

Moira Were 1:01

Thank you. And it's really great to be here face to face.

Helga Svendsen 1:04

Whoo hoo, this is, I'm hoping take on board listeners, you can hear the difference in the audio for this one. And probably the last 20 or 30 that you've heard we are face to face and not only has Moira been from the kitchen table to the cabinet table, we are now sitting on the couch, which is glorious

Moira Were 1:23

and a great place to have a conversation.

Helga Svendsen 1:27

So Moira, before we talk about gender in the boardroom and decision making, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Moira that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Moira Were 1:40

Oh, great question. I think probably I could pinpoint my desire for leadership and organizing others from when I was a Brownie. I was a six or so those of you who are familiar with that paramilitary organization, I was six and you were when you were six, you were in a sixer, which meant there were six people, the person who was the sixth, which was me, and five others. And when I look back now, I think maybe that's when I started my organizing, and helping other people connect. And so part of my job in those days was to help everyone, all of us get our badges and work out which badge we wanted to go for and all that kind of thing. So it's only been in recent time when people have been asking me, you know, to go back and look over your life, you know, what, when did you start doing those sorts of things? And I'm kind of reclaiming my Brownie identity now, in my 60s.

Helga Svendsen 2:39

Oh my god, how fabulous. So as a sixer, so there's six of you in the group? Yes. And is the six? Or is that a particular role?

Moira Were 2:48

Oh, yes, it's the person who's organizing the six of us. And so while it is a leadership, and has responsibilities, it's also a peer role, because we're all the same. And, and but we sort of take directions from well, in those days, the person's identity was Brown Owl, and you never knew her name. And I do think that it was also such a formative time for me because it was all women in women in leadership, and women self organizing, and women supporting women, girls supporting girls. Now, I had no idea obviously at that tender age that that my will set me on a course. But I truly think when I look back at my life now that those seeds of sharing, taking responsibility for one another, working together in collaborative ways, teamwork, looking to older women for mentoring and support, looking to my peers to help us all get to where we needed to go. Actually, all of those lessons were there in Brownies.

Helga Svendsen 3:51

Oh, how fantastic. I think I wasn't a Brownie. I confess, I think I suspect my mother thought, oh, we're not sending you off just that cooking and sewing stuff. And I know there was so much more to it than that. But I think that's how my mother saw it at the time. But you hear over and over again of young women and girls who have been involved in Girl Guides are other organizations like that. It's fabulous. And I did some mentoring a few years ago for a Girl Guides Governance Program that they had for young women to get them involved in boards and so on as well. So well done you sixer!

Moirá Were 4:28

And I think it also was the source of my real interest and appreciation of global citizenship. So you know, one of those first activities you do is like get to learn all the flags of the world. And then you collect stamps from all over the world. And while they just seem pretty benign activities as a young person, in fact, they helped me see from the word go that the world was bigger than just a little bit of it than I was in and my parents were great travelers. So I was first joined the Brownies in New Guinea and Lae. And then we went to the UK for a couple of years. So at the time, I came back to Australia and I was 11, I'd actually been a Brownie in three countries. And that gave me an enormous grade with the local group when I came back, but I didn't go on to Guides. So I went to Guides for about two weeks, I hated it, because it just felt very competitive. And it wasn't the same as being a Brownie and which I found a really collaborative, joyful, playful, really creative place.

Helga Svendsen 5:32

Leaping over. So your Brownie and a six are no less. What about your first board?

Moirá Were 5:38

So yes, my first board I was 19, as I think you said in the beginning, that was with the Service to Youth Council here in South Australia. And in those days, SYC as we know it locally, was essentially a service directed for to young people, particularly teenagers who, for whatever reason, were struggling to find accommodation or perhaps needing some support. And they had a real interest in young people at the margins. So you know, the surfer culture, the early punk culture, that kind of thing. And I was doing an undergraduate degree in psychology and politics, and just thought it's going to take me forever to actually meet real people. And so why don't I volunteer? So I thought, I looked around for what I was interested in, which was the youth work at the time. And so I volunteered with service to youth council. Firstly, they what I loved about it is they provided training. So we did a 12 week counselling service training, which was over the phone, phone counseling in those days. And then they tried to seem to do drug education in schools and youth groups. And I felt like I was getting another tier of practice that the my university education was so much more theoretical, but this was really practical. And so after a few months, being there and volunteering, they were renewing their board, and they always had a youth representative on the board. And the woman who was supervising the group of volunteers, she said to me, you'd be really good on that. Why don't you have a go? And I said, Okay, I didn't really think anything of it. And it was an opportunity, really, for me to learn how to bring the voice of the volunteers to the decision makers, and being young and naive and having nothing to lose and not knowing anything, it may not just dive straight in and but it gave me a huge opportunity to see right from the beginning the place of fundraising of grant making of the way in which decisions get made around what gets kept and what has to go and all of that. So I was really, really grateful for that opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 7:45

So there was one youth rep on the board.

Moirá Were 7:47

Yeah, and how it worked,

Helga Svendsen 7:48

Which is, you know, great for diversity, and diversity, you know, when you said, I didn't know any better, so I just leapt straight in. I mean, that is fantastic experience for you. But it's also fantastic for everybody else around that table, to hear that voice and to have that experience.

Moirá Were 8:03

Yeah, definitely. And years later, you know, fast forward another sort of 20 odd years, 25 years, I was co volunteering South Australian Northern Territory. And at that time, the state government at that time actually had a young people on boards program. And so inevitably, we got two young people onto our board. And that was just great. It certainly did what you're saying that we all benefited from their perspective, from their naivety and from their courage and experience, so it was just fabulous to have them there.

Helga Svendsen 8:35

Some of the listeners may have heard me say this already, but what my first board was YWCA Victoria. And likewise, we had a requirement for four board members to be young women. And the requirement at this time was, I think it was 30 years and under. So four women, depending on how big the board was, at the time, either half or a third of the boardroom, were under 30. It was great, great for everyone.

Moirá Were 8:58

It should be more of it. In fact, I've seen boards get more and more conservative over the last, you know, 20 years, there was much stronger interest in hearing their voice of younger people than I think there is now.

Helga Svendsen 9:10

Oh, that's interesting. Tell me more.

Moira Were 9:12

You know, I'm really I well, I just noticed when when people are going to recruit, they'll they're looking for people who have had a lot of experience in the field. And also the relationship between what I'd call technical experience versus governance or strategic thinking. I think it's very easy to go for someone with the technical expertise and miss out on the bigger thinkers. And so I'm always encouraging people, because I regularly get asked, Have you got any suggestions for someone to come on the board and I know that I tend to look at who they've already got and then suggest people that just don't meet who they've currently got. Because the skills matrix which is very big in governance work these days, I think is also missing some variables around activity. But also thinking about the lived experience of whatever those issues are that the boards are trying to manage. And I see this a lot in, in particular, in some of the startup boards and advisory boards that, you know, they're focusing perhaps on one or two elements, you know, often their bottom line, or capital raise. And I'm always encouraging them to look at what the impact is, what are the impact measurements actually going to do? So why don't you get people that are going to help them stretch themselves into those kind of, you know, new horizons?

Helga Svendsen 10:35

Again, I agree wholeheartedly about the skills matrix. Indeed, not just being a skills matrix. But you know, what's needed in the boardroom overall? Yeah. And much more than I'm a lawyer, and I can imagine a board made up of just lawyers would not be great.

Moira Were 10:53

And I regularly say, don't appoint a lawyer or an accountant on your board, you can hire that. Yeah. And that's a specialist skill. But you know, it's all sorts of potential out there. So grab hold of some different thinkers, some creative thinkers, and don't be scared of different diversity of thought.

Helga Svendsen 11:11

And from your board experience, is there an example or a story, I guess, I've round that diversity of thought coming out in the boardroom bringing in some of those different thinking,

Moira Were 11:21

Yeah, I think I've got lots, but one that just sort of really comes to me, is from my own experience of being on the medical board. So probably 10 years ago, legislation changed nationally, and there is now a National Medical authority. And in those days, it was each jurisdiction had its own. And in South Australia, we changed legislation to have lay people appointed to all of the health related so

the North nurses board, the medical board, speech pathology, up until then it was only those people with those professional backgrounds were on the boards. So when I turned up, I noticed that it was a ministerial appointment. And I was asked to come onto the board because of the work I had done primarily with consumers and my Social Work background, as well as having quite a long policy experience as well in the field. And I remember turning up and quite often, we would have in the olden days, telephone book size papers to go through because we were also at the point of entry before a decision will be made for to go to a tribunal if there was some mis malpractice. And I remember one particular case, the doctors were talking and talking and talking, honestly must have gone on for about 40 minutes. And I hadn't said a word. And I just said to them, this is a page one story if we do not do something about this today, because it will not pass to the barbecue test or the water cooler test or whatever you want to go on at the pub test. And I don't know why you're talking about it has to go to the tribunal. And it was as simple as that. And then everyone just kind of, you know, looked at me and thought, Oh, my god, she's right. Because they were so caught up with the technical side of it. Some are caught up with their personal relationship with the person who it was because the medical profession really is a guild. And they hadn't had lay people ever before on the board. So I think that's a good example of someone who's, you know, literally the person on the streets perspective is actually really valuable. And, you know, to protect health and well being of the whole state.

Helga Svendsen 13:30

And as part of the role in a way of independent directors, because it's partly what I'm hearing from that is partly due to the different view, but it's partly you're not caught up in that world, which you want some people who are caught up in the world of whatever it is that you are governing, but you don't want everybody caught up in that world

Moirá Were 13:49

Now. And I think, you know, what is governance? That's really, and who are we governing for? And why are we there. And so if somebody you know, in a medical context has excellent technical knowledge, great, but not all decisions are technical ones. And in fact, a board is that old adage of, you know, the board's there to steer the ship not to mop the deck. So, you know, if you're steering the ship, you really do need to have a strategic vision, you have to be using the compass on the horizon and the steering wheel, not the bucket in the mob to get things moving.

Helga Svendsen 14:23

So, so thinking about women and gender in the boardroom, or women in gender in decision making, I mean, we've touched on some of it, in some ways already through diversity. What are some of your reflections about what's important? What's key in that?

Moira Were 14:37

One of the things that the culture some of the cultural things like I remember on early early in my board laugh, various guys, gentlemen saying things like you know, but women are so emotional. And can I tell you that the most emotional people on any board I've ever dealt with, are men. Women actually, I find much more rational, I find them more than the men. And it's sorry, guys, you might be listening here. But from a gender point of view they are likely to rely on the evidence. And in my experience, more likely to test out that evidence against basic principles and values, and hold the whole board to account to, you know, the founders mission or vision. And using that as a tool to help them propel them forward to the next level. So that's definitely something I have noticed. And I continue to notice that hasn't gone away. In the 40 years I've been on boards. Another variable, I think, is that generally speaking, women are going to ask questions, that will be uncomfortable. And partly, I think that's because they are more experienced with what it means to be uncomfortable. And so it's not such a big stretch, they don't mind looking, or being seen to be a bit disruptive. Because for most of them, it's it's a thing to be there in the first place. So they're willing to take that step. The other thing I noticed is, if you've only got one woman on a board, it's kind of an exotic, once you've got two or three, or it's 50/50. It changes everything altogether. And in South Australia, under the Wran Labour government, from 2002, we had in our state strategic plan for 50% women on government boards and committees. And that's fallen back in more recent times of changes of government. But that literally shifted the entire way. And decisions were made in the public authorities. And so some of those variables that I'm talking about disappeared, they were invisible, but they are coming back. I'm on the few things that I'm on these days as to notice the olden days reappearing. And I'm always keen to just try and nip those things in the bud.

Helga Svendsen 16:57

Well, it's Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, Victoria, likewise, probably four years ago, there was 50%, of all new appointments to paid government boards would be women. And within 12 months, basically, there was 50/50, on boards, it was it changed incredibly quickly. But what that means is that it doesn't necessarily take that long for things to change the other way as well. So sometimes when change happens quickly, yeah, just shows it can be undone quite quickly.

Moira Were 17:26

And so you really have to make sure you're vigilant about it. And it needs to last more than just a term of government. And it doesn't, hasn't made that much of a difference in the in the corporate sector. And the Institute of Company Directors still haven't met their target, which was 35%. And I think that's very disappointing. I think it's stupid, frankly, we know that if you have more diversity on a board, you'll have better results. One of the things I'll often say as well, you obviously don't want to do the best by your shareholders. And that kind of upsets people. But it sets the agenda pretty quickly about well, what's getting in the way of you not appointing women onto your board, or people diversity, different backgrounds, all of those things, people speak three languages, they're going to be thinking in three languages, that means they'll have a broader range of conceptual

frameworks to draw around. And why would you not want to have your shareholders have access to that? You know, critical thinking? That's a no brainer to me.

Helga Svendsen 18:27

Absolutely. So what do you think is getting in the way? Because likewise, I'm equally flabbergasted that we can't even get to a third. And that's just in terms of gender diversity on boards, not even thinking about cultural diversity or age diversity, or all of the other different levels of diversity on boards. What what's getting in the way? Oh,

Moirá Were 18:47

Patriarchy. Colonization, you know, we just think it's as fundamental as that. And I mean, I regularly get calls from people saying, Oh, we want to appoint a woman to a board. We don't know any. And I go, are you serious? We have in South Australia, for example, the Innovation Award. So it's women in innovation. And so if there are startups or companies like that, that asked me, I go, have you heard of the Innovation Awards? In fact, one of your companies helped sponsor that. So you just look at the last two or three years with a winners. Yeah, and see who you can see that you already probably know. Do you have a Twitter account? Have you heard of this thing called Google? You know, like, LinkedIn? I think it's patriarchy. I think it's lack of imagination. I think they because they don't know someone, therefore that person doesn't exist. And that's a very narrow worldview. And you know, I'm also really keen to provide opportunities for for younger people, people from cultural diverse backgrounds, and indigenous people, but not all of it. Not everyone wants to be influenced in that way and be on a board. And I think that's the value of having advisory boards. Reference groups, there's all sorts of ways, just even in the design of your engagement, making sure that you're finding ways in which didn't get all the voices to be heard and some of the not so usual suspects, once you get expressed and made visible.

Helga Svendsen 20:15

Absolutely, I could not agree more, it doesn't have to be in the boardroom, I think it is useful to have a diverse boardroom, I think that's a valuable thing. But it's not the only way to engage, you don't have to put everyone in the boardroom, you can have different ways of doing that. Definitely, during your professional life, tell me about the role of mentors in your role, both as a mentor, because my punt would be you are a mentor to many, and also mentors for you.

Moirá Were 20:44

Yeah, I've been very lucky. I've had lots of fabulous people around me. And I've also had people who've taken me under their wing, without me knowing that they were my mentor, who have seen something that they want to nurture in me. So one of my favorite stories was when I was on the



Council of Churches, I was on a subcommittee, which we used to hold all the funds for the Christmas bowl, which was a major fundraising event by all the Australian churches. And I had kind of like an observer status, because the church I was representing weren't members of the council churches, but we were alongside of it. But I was a full participant in the meetings. And I could see there was something not right with the, the numbers on the balance sheet. But I couldn't quite work out what was wrong. It just didn't seem right. There was a trend I could notice. And one of the fellows from another church who I trusted, and I said, something's wrong. But you'll know because he was, in those days, he was a very big deal and public servant in one of the federal agencies. And so I thought, well, who can speak up? He knows what he's doing. He's been here for years. And he said, No, no, you speak up, and I go, what how am I no one even notices me I could, his instruction to me was get your little calculator out, which when I talked to all my meetings was was money meetings, he said, just you know, press all the buttons for a minute, take a deep gasp or you know, and, and then scribble a number down and then do it again, and and take a sigh of relief at the end of it. And he said probably by then everyone in the room will be looking at you. And the chair will say Moira, have you got something you'd like to share with us. And that's exactly what happened. And I just have Harold, thank you, if you're listening, it was great. It was it was a really good tip. And what it meant was, it helped me understand that I didn't have to kind of raise my voice or put on a turn of any kind. But there were plenty of ways to get attention. And to have that in my kit bag of tools to use was a really good early, early lesson for me. And all along the way. I had people who would and still do, who people will put me forward for things, or invite me to attend and challenge a compensation or so I've been very, very lucky. And then in turn, that's meant that in my mentoring, I've made sure that I can pass on the tips that on the things that helped me, and that I can also really listen to what the problem was. And so in my example, it was because I could see something that I didn't know how to describe it. But he didn't let that get in the way of me being able to have a voice. And I think that was a fantastic lesson to learn really early on and, and one that I can help pass on to other people.

Helga Svendsen 23:43

Absolutely. Well, hopefully the people listening will take that on as well.

Moira Were 23:46

I hope to see that in many meetings from now.

Helga Svendsen 23:49

Tapping away on the calculator, and then the sigh and i'd love it. In fact, even just taking calculators to meetings.

Moira Were 23:57

Oh yeah, I've always I still do. Oh, I love it. I still do here. And I mean, obviously now you're on your phones quite a lot, you know, the digital means but I still have my little pencil case. That's the other little lesson I think I noticed you having one. But I do have my little pencil case. And I like to take my pencils out. And usually I'm doodling or not doing anything with it. And even in this digital age where so many nowadays, you know, you get your board back, and you know, digital platform. And I still think it's useful to have a notebook with you. And I still use a notebook when I'm in meetings, to follow up things, particularly off someone will say something I'll think what's not really for this meeting, but I'd like to know a little bit more than that. And then I can follow it up with an email or phone call or just you know, ask them something on the way back to the left.

Helga Svendsen 24:43

Absolutely. I do likewise often end up with little margin notes. Oh, don't forget to check with someone so about this or whatever it may be. And what about conflict like I am imagining both in the boardroom but also probably in the work that you do as well. In and around that you've dealt with conflict, both been in it and around it quite a bit. And in fact, my view anyway, is that conflict in the boardroom is a good thing. As long as it's managed well, yeah. So can you tell me how's conflict been managed well, or been managed? And what are some tips for dealing with?

Moira Were 25:17

A great question? I, if I'm chairing I feel really comfortable with conflict. And I often will ask a question to invoke some conflict or invokes and difference of opinion like is anyone else got an alternative opinion, but when I'm a participant, and I'm not chairing, I can be like the recalcitrant teenager. And I can be quite difficult and say, well, hang on a minute, two seconds ago, we said this, and now we're saying that, so do we have a view and I can trust, what I'm often trying to do is work out what our foundational principle is. And so for me in conflict, that's usually my go to place to try and raise the, whatever the contrasting points might be. So because I find that sometimes conversations in boards can go round and round the mulberry bush, and we miss out the principle that should be guiding us. So that's how I tend to manage that. And if as a participant, but you know, sometimes conflict is really hard, and people need to go take their the conflict that they're having to manage outside of the boardroom and get an external facilitator in and sometimes I'm actually that person, sometimes in boards, and has certainly had been on boards when we've been requiring some external support, to help us work through a really difficult situation. And, and they have been difficult situations on many boards that I've been in over the years, things like decisions around, and investment decisions around hiring and firing, both board members and CEOs, hiring and firing executive staff who you might want to merge with or not merge with. I mean, those things will often be quite conflictual, because of a range of views in the room. And they do need really good management and leadership in discussion. And sometimes that's not possible because the whoever's leading it might hold the holding on very, very tightly, or be overwhelmed by and not be able to hold on tightly enough. And so I think it's perfectly legitimate to get some external support for those

times. And if you're a board member, that you ask that of the chair, even if they might not support that to begin with, but just try and get to that point. And that's happened, probably in half a dozen boards I've been in over the last 20 years.

Helga Svendsen 27:50

And I think having that being seen as a healthy thing, as a, almost as a measure of success in a way because, you know, linking it back to the conversation we were having earlier about diversity in the boardroom, the more diversity you have in the boardroom, the more likely they will be that maybe conflict is not the right word, but tension and healthy tension.

Moira Were 28:09

Yeah, it is so dynamic. And I think if everyone's thinking the same thing, then the chances are, you're not arriving to a decision that can be sustained for long. I mean, I always think of bumping Metro and make a decision. Will this last? If I got hit by a bus tomorrow? Could it be overturned quickly? Or would it be able to last? And so the the legacy piece is always in my mind? And you know, and I say to people all the time, particularly hiring senior executives and CEOs, CFOs, you know, what's the succession plan? Not for just this hire. But for the next two or three? You know, are you looking to build your team internally? Are we looking to who our collaborators are or to a national movement, or whatever that might be? And how are we supporting the entire ecosystem, so that we are getting good leaders everywhere, not just in our boardroom, because that really, you know, in the kind of world we live in, everything's connected. And so you do want a strong sector, whether, you know, it's the not for profit world or in the corporate world. And in fact, all of these things overlap these days. So if you're serious about impact, you really want to find ways in which to build succession through the the whole ecosystem, not just the company or the business that you're working with.

Helga Svendsen 29:26

Oh, we've covered so many things here. One of the main points you want people to take away from the conversation we've had today?

Moira Were 29:32

Be brave, feel free to ask questions. trust your intuition. Like if you if it doesn't feel right, the chances are that you're probably right, something's not right. You know, don't second guess yourself, get a second opinion, say look, this is what it looks like to me. Is that right? Or can anyone else verify that and feel free to say that because there's nothing too silly or, and chances are that if you're thinking it, there's probably two other people thinking exactly the same. Wondering yeah, and, you know, to be brave enough to to trust your intuition?

Helga Svendsen 30:05

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

Moira Were 30:09

Great question. I am, I always this is a really old book called by Bob Garrett, "The Fish Rots from the Head", I still refer people to that the cycle of decision making that's in that book, I think it's a really great resource. I don't think it's gone out of date or out of fashion, I'd still encourage people to do that. And watch that. And the other thing I always encourage people to do is to watch Apollo 13. And you see them caught in space. And everyone's down on the ground in Houston trying to solve the problem, and they're working together. And it's probably about a six or seven minute piece of the movie. And I think it's the best example of teamwork that you could ever, ever watch. And the way that the decisions are made, the concept of improvisation working with what they've got, having in these days of remote working, how could be more remote than floating around out of space, and being on the ground, and then having the challenge of communicating that back and forth, I just think is, it is still a world class way of teaching teamwork.

Helga Svendsen 31:17

Oh, I love it. That's a resource that hasn't been suggested before on the podcast. I will put links to both of those things in the show notes. I thank you so much for sharing your time and your lounge with me today. I don't know if I said it at the top of the podcast. But I'm in Adelaide at the moment. And I just put out a call on LinkedIn for whoever's in Adelaide to get in touch and to have this conversation with take on board. So thank you for literally answering the call and giving your time to us today and sharing some of your wisdom with us. It's much appreciated.

Moira Were 31:51

My pleasure. Thanks, Helga.