

Anita Roper

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SPEAKERS

Helga Svendsen



Helga Svendsen 00:00

Today on the take on board podcast, we're going to talk through tips and tricks to getting on a board. I'll be speaking with a native Roper. And nature has over 30 years experience in senior management roles working with business communities government and multilateral agencies in Australia, Canada, UK and the USA. Her executive career spans the private and public sectors, including Chief Executive Officer at sustainability Victoria and global director of sustainability with Alcoa in New York. And nature is a current director of Yarra Valley Water and the Stroke Association of Victoria. And she's previously been a board member at the highest would call mine fire inquiry. The Victorian public sector advisory board, Fitzroy Football Club, Pacific hydro Anglo gold shanties global panel on sustainability, and Women's Network for a sustainable future. She's got a wealth of experience that she can share with us about getting on the board, as you can hear from her experience. Welcome to the take on board podcast. And Lisa,



00:59

Thanks very nice to be with you today. So



Helga Svendsen 01:02

with all of that experience, I'm wondering if you can tell us about your earliest governance experience?



01:08

Well, you might remember from my time at sustainability, Victoria, that I have a passion for sport, in particular football and of course, the Fitzroy football club. I think, going back to when I was a very young child, that passion was instilled in me by my father, who was very involved in Fitzroy, but also involved in local government and local community organization. So the leadership level. One of those organizations was he was chairman of the Danang and district Junior football tribunal that had over 3000 young people taking the field every week. And I think I was in my early 20s, I was appointed to it as a member of that tribunal as the first female member. And in those early days, that appointment is to cause some very, very interesting road, it's when a player who had been reported for using abusive language towards the Empire appeared before us at the tribunal. That was that had interesting moments. Also, through those years, it taught me a lot. exercising your judgment and interpersonal skills are two critical attributes for a director. And they were certainly required in the tribunal setting.



Helga Svendsen 02:24

What a fascinating way to start in governance, as a tribunal member, you know, might not be able to talk about a bit, can you tell us about any of those interesting times, as you talked about them, of being a tribunal member?



02:37

We can't obviously talk about any of the cases per se. But I can certainly talk about umpires coming in sitting down in front of us starting to talk about what occurred on the field, they would get to the stage of saying, and the players said, and they would look at me, and I would look down and look at the other tribunal members, and then not really know what to do next. Whether to say it, where the whispers and the tribunal Chairman would say if you're more comfortable, just write it down. And so they would write down the words and they would pass it across to us as a tribunal members. And then we'd all pass it along and read it anyway. So we still had to do the deliberations. All that is fantastic writing down the notes and passing it along. Oh, my goodness, which I'm assuming they didn't do before you joined the tribunal. Wow. And they clearly didn't know you very well, native culture were pretty straight up and down person, I'm pretty sure you can deal with whatever it was that was written on those sheets of paper. That's right,



Helga Svendsen 03:44

in thinking then about getting on a board and having that very early experience as a tribunal member. I wonder if you can tell us a bit more about how you got board ready to, to leverage that experience into the other roles that you've had?



03:59

Well, I think most of my career, I've been involved in committees and boards in in one way or another, either as a participant thing on a committee, or through reporting to a board. So I have a fairly long history. And that goes right back to my international career, which you mentioned through to my time of coming back to Australia and working at sustainability, Victoria. So I had that very long, long time. And then I've got to the point where I wanted to take that next step. And that next step for me was to look at a director career and to to build the skill set required for that. So I completed the company directors course, the company directors course in about 2011. And I was also accepted into the ARCA days chairman's mentoring program, and very fortunate enough to have John Mercer as my mentor, who at the time was chairman of New Chris Mining, and as past CEO of the ANZ bank. And it was during that time, I learned so much from my conversations with Don. And I'm not sure if you're familiar with the chairman's mentoring program, how you bet. What that does, is they match the participant in this case me with a director and experienced Chairman or director of an listed company for a 12 month period, where you have that experience to sit down and talk with them about their lessons, their learnings, and they impart their wisdom to you. And that was one of the stepping stones for me. So I did that for 12 months, had the ICT program also had the opportunity to go to Harvard and do some short board courses, which I did. So I got to the point where I was fairly forward ready.



Helga Svendsen 05:54

So you've told us about doing the ICT chairman's mentoring program, Harvard short board courses? What happened next? How did you then use those skills and the experience you'd had on boards previously, to leverage into your next role?



06:09

I'd been involved with Fitzroy football club for many, many years. As a, as I said, a lifelong supporter, been involved in fundraising events in helping organize events being around the club knew the people, and I was invited to join the board. So that was being involved in an organization and knowing an organization. The second board that I joined was Pacific

hydro, which was at the time, I owned a privately owned company owned by one of our superfans. And that came about through, I was reading an article which happened to be in the AICD magazine. And there was a quote from Gary Weaver who was the chairman of Pacific hydro at the time. And I contacted Gary and arranged have a discussion with him. And timing can be everything. He had had a resignation or Pacific hydro had a resignation on their board. And they had a vacancy, they were looking for a new board member, it happened to be someone with people and culture experience, which was also my skill set. And as fate would happen, I was successful, and I was appointed to the board. So that was the next step in my in my board career.



Helga Svendsen 07:23

And there is such a great lesson in that. I love that that timing can be everything. As we know, quite often board roles are not advertised quite often, you won't just see them on any of the listings, but you're in the right ear at the right time with the right skill set.



07:39

And that is so true. Because you really just don't know where the opportunity will come from. And you hear that story time and time again, whilst it's really important to plan and to have a plan to think about the sorts of board positions that you would be interested in applying for and having some targets, you really need to be open to that opportunity was some years ago, I was sitting next to the chairman of a listed company at a at a luncheon we were chatting, to be honest, I didn't think much more about it. A couple of weeks later, he rang me and he said, Would I sit down and meet with the CEO of his company, because he had a vacancy, which of course I did, that didn't eventually get into me securing a position on that board. But it was still an opportunity that presented itself to me that came about not through an application not through and advertise fake and see, but just through a chance meeting and a conversation.



Helga Svendsen 08:41

So I think I'm hearing that part of your tips might be, you know, do some of the training around it, whether it's the AICD company directors course or something else, do some training, open your networks, let people know that you're looking for a ball roll so that you've got the best possible opportunity of being in the right ear at the right time. What other tips and tricks would be helpful for our listeners around getting on board,



09:06

one of the other ones is be authentic, and be authentic in all aspects. And I know that's a little different from where our conversation has gone today. But be authentic with your CV with your interview with all aspects of your applications. Because it's not a fish, it's not a fit, when you're going down the path of having a conversation about a potential board, you're better off finding out early and you're better off finding out before you accept, because it's much harder to get off a board once you're on it. And in some ways than to get on it. People don't think about that. So you really do want to make sure that it's the right fit, you've got to spend as much time making sure it's a cultural fit, as you do in making sure that you find the right board. Absolutely. I hear people talking about doing this due diligence about an organization that I might be researching. And part of that is, you know, potentially looking at the financials and the annual report, but part of it is exactly that finding out about the culture.



Helga Svendsen 10:12

Have you got any suggestions for people about how they find out those things about a board before they join, rather than ending up on the wrong board?



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Well, during your research, of course, and and I say of course. But you would be amazed at how many people actually don't do their research, before they actually even apply for a board. There are the very simple ways these websites go in, look at the annual report, look at the financials, do that due diligence. But the other way is, check out who's already on the board, check out how often the board is turned over? Do you know anybody on the board work your way into finding out what that board is looking for? How the board operates? What's the transparency the board? Who can you talk to that know something about the company know something about the organization. So again, it's that networking, it's that conversation, talk to people,



Helga Svendsen 11:07

it's vital for finding out some of that inside word on what the organization is like.



11:12

This is not the case in all situations. But it's almost like if you're applying for a board

position, and all you're doing is riding the covenant and sending in your CV, without having had any conversation at all about that board, you probably need to ask if it is the right board and your fish? Because what is your value proposition to that board?

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Helga Svendsen 11:37

If you've got no connection to it at all? Absolutely. And having been on the other side of board interviews, you can tell when people have done their research, and have spoken to other board members or other staff members or whoever it may be and know a bit more about the organization, it's pretty clear pretty quickly.

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11:55

That's right. similar situation. I've done interviews for board positions. And same thing, it was clear that some of the applicants had not even looked at our website and had no concept at all about what the organization even did. You can't really expect to have a commitment to the organization if they have not even opened up their website.

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Helga Svendsen 12:16

You mentioned as part of preparation, one of the things you mentioned was your board resume and having a resume ready. Can you talk us through what your view is about what a board resume should look like?

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12:27

It's different to your executive resume. It's a lot shorter. I think it needs to have a succinct statement about what we've talked about the elevator pitch, just what is your offering? What is your value proposition? What is your unique proposition that you have to offer the board. So I would say no more than two, three pages, it should fairly clearly state your experience in relation to your board appointments, both current and past. That should be the focus rather than your executive experience. Of course, your executive experience should be included if it's relevant, but the focus should be your board work. But it should be fairly short and succinct. You can always provide more data and information later if that's required. What is more important, I think is the cover letter to show what your unique value proposition is.

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Helga Svendsen 13:22

and tailored to that organization.



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Everything should be tailored to the organization,



Helga Svendsen 13:27

what are the tips and tricks might you have in your little kit bag that would be helpful for people.



13:32

One of the qualities of a board member I think maybe we could touch on that briefly. Because sometimes we think get it's very easy just to transition to being a board member from an executive role. And I think one of the differences between an executive role and a board role is a board is a different environment. It's a team environment. So that concept of being a team player, collegiate role of a board, those sorts of qualities need to be front and center in terms of a board member, a willingness to learn the inquiring mind I like to talk about and that never stops when you're a board member, you need to be curious, you need to want to learn, you need to read widely, and need to understand the external environment that you operate in, keep in touch with the outside world. Now, what are the changes in government policy that might impact your organization? These are the sorts of things that a board member needs to be aware of in terms of the organization that they're operating in. How do you do this, do this in in many, many different ways. You know, a board member doesn't just turn up once a month, there are site visits, there are understanding your customer, just using the products if it's a retail product, who your stakeholders are meeting your stakeholders, one of the boards I was on offered Spanish lessons for board members, because we had major operations in Brazil. So there are many, many different ways that you need to stay connected and understand your your industry. So you need to to make sure that you're prepared in all aspects of your industry and understand all aspects of your business. You need to be prepared, you need to do your homework.



Helga Svendsen 15:26

Again, it's a great reminder, I think often people have this view that board members just turn up to a board meeting once a month or once every two months or three months, whatever it may be, and just magically know what's going on an organization where is

that is a very active and engaged process all of the time. So it's a great reminder to people that it's not just spawning into a boardroom every now and again and knowing what's going on. And in particular, you're reminded there about the stakeholders if there was one thing that came out of the financial services Royal Commission was know your customer know your stakeholders and take those views into account.



16:00

And yes, the stakeholder element is absolutely critical. But one of the other qualities, though I think that is extremely important for a board member that is perhaps something that we don't sort of think about from our executive role is also that again, I come back to this as a team, it's a team environment. And I think you need to think about how you leave your ego at the door. I always remember one of the more difficult elements for me and one of my interviews for a board was actually my reappointment for Yarra Valley Water was when I was asked, What have you contributed to your Valley Water? And that was actually a really difficult question to answer. Because as an individual hadn't really done a lot individually, or I don't think of it as doing things individually. Because you do things collectively as a board. So to talk about it, this Yarra Valley, that's sort of not how we operate, you do things collectively, and was part of discussions that and I'd like to think I contributed to those discussions, and contributed to maybe this is we could do things this way, or maybe have we thought about this. But I'm not quite sure that it's the right thing for a board member to have this list of going well, this was my contribution. I don't think that's how boards work. And it really is a team environment. And that's one of the skill sets. And that's why not everybody is suited to board work.



Helga Svendsen 17:29

I've found that tension myself around what the individual contribution is versus the board contribution is, it's a very, it's a hard one, I think to work. Because like you, I think you retain, it's one of those things where it really is or really should be where the sum is greater than each of the individual parts. So try to pull out that individual contribution is hard. What did you say? How did you answer that?



17:53

Ah, that that I can tell



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you because I was pushed and pushed and and in the end, I didn't have to pull something out of my hash, which was part of the board. I did have to give an example. And and I did and I said, Well, do I really have to I could say this as one of my contributions, but I'm not comfortable. I'm not comfortable about it. But they obviously seem to like that that particular answer.



Helga Svendsen 18:20

Because you were you were re appointed. So that must have liked it.



18:23

Well, yes. You know, it is something you do think about? Because it's an interesting question. I know why they asked the question. And I mean, I have sat on boards where there have been passengers, and I can place to say that Yarra Valley Water is not one of them. And I think we've all done that we've set on boards where people don't contribute, and it's not. But if you are sitting on a board where there's equal contributors, where we're all actually working as equals, you're not keeping score, and you shouldn't be keeping score. That's a sign of dysfunctional board, if you are,



Helga Svendsen 18:56

we've talked about a really broad range of things around some of the training that might be available to support people in getting prepared, how to use your networks, getting your resume ready, being authentic, being a quality board member, and what that might mean about being a team player and being curious and getting some of that input from a whole range of different organizations. So as a whole range of other things. I'm wondering, NATO, what are the main points that you really want people to take away from our conversation today?



19:27

Be prepared, I think that be prepared and be authentic. That would be true. And as we talked about earlier, you never know where the opportunity will come from when we're talking about actually getting onto a board. But I think the hour that we sort of moved a bit into and talking about it is the importance that a board is part of a team. And therefore the interpersonal skills are absolutely critical to being a good board member. I think that is a critical factor that is often not talked about, when people are thinking about getting onto a board. I think it's about how do I get onto a board? How do I do my

resume? What's the process? How do I apply? And we go through all the logistics, the mechanisms for doing it, but we don't talk enough about so what are the qualities that are required? When you actually get onto a board? What do I need? What are the skill sets that I made. And I think that interpersonal skills, that teamwork that is so important, that is quite different to the executive role, where you're more functionally operating on a day to day basis, as opposed to needing to take that holistic organizational viewpoint that you need to take as a director,

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Helga Svendsen 20:40

fantastic. And I'm wondering, can you recommend a resource for the take on board community, maybe a book or a podcast, a TED talk or something else.

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20:49

It's a book that was given to me, by the head of HR human resources for our global head of HR for our car, on the first day I started when I joined our car in New York. It's called the first 90 days by Michael Watkins. And that book I've passed on to all the folks that I mentor for the advice that he gave to me about networks and also for the strategic advice. It's a great book, The premise of the book is, is about listening, and learning. But what it really is about don't wait too long before you act, the first 90 days, make sure that in those first 90 days, you don't just sit back, you do listen and you do learn, but you then get on and do things.

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Helga Svendsen 21:35

It's a beautiful segue to my next question, which is we've had a bunch of people listening and learning from our conversation today. What a couple of actions that you can suggest for them to when they're getting on to taking action, two or three actions, the impact that they might want to take

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the ambitious, I mentioned, how Pacific hydro how you know, I saw an article, I contacted the chairman. So terms of action actually go out and and seek if you have a board that you're interested in, do the research, and then go and find a way to talk to people who knows something about that organization. Don't wait for it to come to you. Because it won't come to you if you sit back and wait. That would be my big advice. I think go find it. Go find it. I love it. Thank you.



Helga Svendsen 22:24

Thanks, Anita, thank you for your time today. It's been fantastic to hear some of those beautiful pearls of wisdom that I know are going to help some of the women that are listening to this get on board and be a really effective board members. So thank you for your time. Thanks, Helga