



Take on Board

Transcript – Michelle Redfern

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Michelle Redfern about building your board portfolio, aligning with interests, purpose and skills. First, let me tell you about Michelle. Michelle is a member of the Wayfinder Steering Committee and the former chair of Speckle Financial Health, the former deputy chair of Good Shepherd Microfinance, and a former board member of Williamstown Football Club, the Gippsland League and Swinburne University Business Without Borders. She began her board career as the secretary for High Vale Netball Association. Today, Michelle is the founder of Advancing Women, an enterprise providing research and advisory services on Workplace Gender Equality, inclusion and diversity. She is co host of A Career that Soars, co founder of Culturally Diverse Women and host of the Lead to Soar podcast. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Michelle

Michelle Redfern 0:56

Thank you. Helga,, it is a great honor to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:00

It is awesome to have you because not only are we going to talk all things boards and governance and all those sorts of wonderful things. It's pretty exciting having another podcast host on the podcast as well. It's only your audio folks. So you can't say that Michelle is set up with all of the amazing microphones and audio so I think you'll find today's audio to be of high quality, which is great. Now, Michelle, before we dig into building your board portfolio, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me what was a young Michelle like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom?

Michelle Redfern 1:38

Oh, young Michelle? I grew up in regional Western Australia in a town called Geraldton. And I spent a lot of time trailing round after we're both my parents but my dad in particular, and my story is like a lot of other women in that I kind of looked at mum and dad and thought oh yeah, that's pretty cool. And then I also looked at mum and dad rooms a bit later and went, Oh my God, this A Daggy. However, in retrospect, and with the greatest respect, my parents were really community focused. So dad was in Lions, the Lions Club for my entire childhood. He was president for a number of years, Mum was on the school Parents and Friends Committee, she ran the canteen. She's led delegations

for a new principal at one stage and you know, Mum and Dad were involved in community and in sport. So I trailed around after them a lot. Doing stuff sometimes happily, sometimes very begrudgingly. But I was pretty happy kid. Pretty normal, you know, played sport. We went to school, hang around a bit nerdy child number one. So people have always said to me, I'm a leader and I always have been a leader. So yes, I do like to take charge. So yeah, I was I was that like, charge kid.

Helga Svendsen 2:54

I'm laughing at child number one because as child number three, I would say child number one, a leader is how we should describe them as but from child number three, it was always maybe a bit bossy as well.

Michelle Redfern 3:05

100% Yes, I'm a young. I'm one of three girls and my younger sister Nicole would go oh, the stories I could tell. And she was an annoying little flea. Now. We're very, very good friends. So

Helga Svendsen 3:17

That definitely sounds like it's reflected in our family as well. Maybe I need to have a glass of wine with Nicole one day and compare younger sibling stories. Maybe. So you've been on a range of boards. You started at High Vale netball club, you said you played a couple of sports. When you were younger, actually, what other sports did you play just out of interest?

Michelle Redfern 3:40

So netball, softball, I was a reasonably good Junior swimmer played a bit of basketball. And then as I got older, I played a bit of touch of rugby, and then I played netball right through until my second pregnancy. So netball, and softball, probably the sports that have featured as most prominently ... I shudder to call myself an athlete, not as a participant. And then I was involved with via mum and dad, but particularly dad with Woody and cricket.

Helga Svendsen 4:10

For those that are thinking about building a board portfolio and maybe particularly in sports. What's your advice to them? Where should they begin?

Michelle Redfern 4:18

Get involved. So the way I got involved for as well, as I said, I kind of had the imprint on me because of mum and dad and then being involved in that service to community and club and things like that. So when my children started playing sport, it was, in my own mind expected that I would show up and get involved in some way and, and I've often said particularly when Kelsey, my daughter was playing, she started playing netball at the age of eight. And we lived in Glen Waverley at the time here in Melbourne. And if anyone's ever been to Jells Park, netball courts at 8am or 7:30am on a wintry Saturday morning. It's pretty rugged. So you know, any committee member knows that there's a parent that keeps showing up at that time and currencies, can I help you go? Right? Let's snap them. So that was me. So I turned up. So I ran, I scored and manage then I'd learned to umpire and things like that. And then with Brendan, my son who started playing football, I fronted up to the footy club and said, right, I want to get involved, but hey, I'm not working in the canteen. I'm not chopping up oranges, or run water. And they said, Would you like to be the umpire escort? I said, Yes, I'd love to be Thank you very much. So I got involved. And I remember Peggy O'Neill saying, who was the first woman president of a, an AFL club, her saying that she started off exactly the same way. She turned up to Richmond said I love this club, what can I do and volunteered. So I started volunteering. And that then led to me having this beautiful realization that, okay, I could probably score and run around and umpire and coach and things like that. But I've got these really good administrative skills. So when the club asked me to jump onto the committee, I went, sure, because I'm good at going to meetings, I worked for a big company. I then quickly realized that, oh, some of my ideas were and processes and administration, I was good at it. So I think quickly was elevated to Secretary because we're an Incorporated Association, and suddenly realized, ah, this is governance. And there's requirements and reporting and constitutions and all of that kind of stuff. So yeah, I got involved and then learned over time that my skills really aligned with what I loved, which is sport. And it also allowed me to stay involved in sport without being a participant. That's where it started. But it was an absolute aha moment of, I love sport, I want to stay involved. And I've got these skills, these administration, these leadership skills, which are, frankly, really useful. So that was it.

Helga Svendsen 6:57

Fantastic. And for those that want to be involved in sport, but not necessarily run around on the field, or run around on the track, or whatever it may be, it gives a fantastic way of getting that involvement in the administration of the sport...

Michelle Redfern 7:12

Whether it's shaping that club, whether it's shaping the game, or as I then started to learn, perhaps I could do a whole bunch of other shaping, I could influence some outcomes at a more macro level that I'd started to observe. So yeah.

Helga Svendsen 7:30

Tell me about that. What were those macro outcomes that you wanted to influence?

Michelle Redfern 7:34

Well, being part of a very, very big Netball Association, I, I learned that as a senior representative of our club, it was useful to build good stakeholder relationships with the larger association. And that meant turning up and showing up to certain things. And you know, that's the way business works are good. So I did that. But what I noticed was I went well, where are where all the dads, there's a lot of women around here. And then I started looking at the Netball Victoria board and netball, Australia board at that time, and we're talking about the early 2000s. And because our little club, which in fact, was a very big club, we had about 18 teams at our peak, we had quite a number of dads who were involved in the community in coaching, all that kind of stuff. So we had a very gender balanced parent representation. And I started to look further up the chain in terms of administration, I thought, well, there should be more dads, and there should be more variety of people more diversity of people shaping the game. And someone happened to say to me, Michelle, you should jump on the Netball Victoria board and I said, oh, no, I think I'd rather go straight to Netball Australia. And then I went actually, actually, netball is not where I want to have an impact. Football is, I started to thought hang on a minute, if there's a whole bunch of women in netball, betcha there's a whole bunch of men in football. And that is just not the way we create sustainable flourishing organisations. So that was kind of my aha moment. Okay, this is a thing. This is a thing and then my great friend Philippa Dobbin at the time said, your board career, what are you going to do about? Oh I don't know. I'll just work it out as I go along. And then she started talking to me, she said, I think the here's a couple of things that you might want to think about doing a couple of associations, you know, company directors course, women on boards, you know, that kind of stuff. And really much it snowballed from there.

Helga Svendsen 9:40

Always good. You know, the thing I'm hearing in there is not only are those tips fantastic, but have a mentor or a sounding board in your sphere to give you some of those ideas for exactly where you want to be.

Michelle Redfern 9:52

Absolutely, because I kind of had a bit of an end game but I didn't have a launch point. So I said about getting myself trying to be a director to learn governance, so I invested a reasonable amount of time on understanding what it would take. And I remember my very first half day training with women on boards, and it was Clare Braun and Ruth were running, it would have been back in 2009, or 2010, something like that. And the first thing I learned was your executive CV is not your board directors CV. And you should always read the Australian Financial Review. And there was just so

much more learning from that clearly. But they're the two things that stuck with me. And now I, I say that to aspiring board directors, as you really got to know the business of business and what goes on in the ecosystem that is business. But also, this is different to your executive or your leadership career.

Helga Svendsen 10:50

Absolutely. I just had a conversation this morning with yet another nominations committee where we reflected on some of the applications were people's executive resumes, and they didn't get through the mix, because you can't see what it is they are going to contribute to the boardroom. It's so frustrating when you can see they are probably good people, but they are not showcasing what they need to showcase for the board roles. So yes, okay. So again, I'm picking up the tips. Have a mentor or a sounding board, in your boardroom, definitely have a board resume, invest in your training, invest in your own development in the boardroom, even though you clearly had some practical training that you'd got through your secretary role, you then build on that with some more formal training as well.

Michelle Redfern 11:39

And I think I certainly hadn't considered that to be the start of my governance career until later on, or when actually that was, because you are, it's the mechanics of overseeing and governing an organisation, no matter whether it's immunity, grassroots for profit, listed, whatever it may be. And yeah, you're right. I think I know, when I did the company directors course, I'd already had a couple of boards under my belt by then. And I found it really, really useful, because and it was great, because there were practical stories. And I mean, you would do it in your, in your getting board ready programs. When you can bring that storytelling and practical examples. It moves beyond theory. So I found that very useful. Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 12:25

Absolutely. And you must get asked this all the time, as well. But I often get asked about the company directors course or other training, those sorts of things and when to do it. And my personal view is you'll get much more out of the program, if you're already on a board or been on a board. So that it is that practical application rather than a theoretical application. So yeah,

Michelle Redfern 12:47

And actually went off track there. But don't dismiss the experience you get on your children's sporting or the PNF, or the daycare, or the community daycare organisation. If someone says we've got a committee chair, and you're interested in a board career, do what I didn't go yes, or no learn and take it on board, pardon the pun, as as a learning experience, because it is all of it is just building

and building and building your knowledge. But also then, I think the other thing useful for me, Helga, is that continuing professional development as a director, but also learning aha, that's what I need to know more of. So I've got a gap. And I need to really close that gap over this next period of time. What do I need to do about that?

Helga Svendsen 13:34

So tell me, what are some of the gaps that you identified in your governance skill set? And what did you do about it? That stuff's really useful to hear.

Michelle Redfern 13:42

Yeah, so my mine definitely was my financial acumen. So and I certainly in the group's I lead programs on business, strategic and financial acumen, which kind of makes my 15 year ago I sort of have a bit of a chuckle because I catapulted myself out of a 15 year career at Telstra, let's see what I can do found this amazing job. And this amazing job involved was an executive role. It involved pricing and budgeting and strategizing. And I didn't even know how to use Excel. I was very, very low on the maturity scale of financial acumen. Luckily, I'm while I'm now married to a CFO, my darling wife gave me a crash course in a profit and loss of balance sheet and cash flow. And then I went and did my MBA later on after that, I worked out that that was going to be a real career, all of my career a real derail, if I didn't do something about it then in there. So I said about building my financial acumen and you know, I am a very much a strategic thinker, long term, what have you I'm also really good at operations, as in getting done here and now and making decisions. But now that I've got that acumen around it know, particularly as a director, what to look for, and how to how to really test the things that management are telling us, as directors of an organisation just say, Does this stand true under scrutiny? I'm not meaning to be adversarial but you've got to know what you've got to know. So that you can see that you're fulfilling your duties as a director. So that was, that was my big one.

Helga Svendsen 15:30

Yeah, and it is, once you've got the principles of that, you can apply it to any boardrooms. Um, you know, I had a conversation with somebody the other day who's joined a larger board. And she was like, they're just zeros. It's the same principles. There's just a few more zeros now in in the balance sheets and p&l that I'm looking at. So if you can get the principles down pat, it works beautifully. You'd said before you were involved in netball. And then somebody had said, get yourself on Netball Victoria. I went no, no, after some thinking, I want to be involved in football administration, football boardrooms. How did that happen? What were the steps?

Michelle Redfern 16:06

Step number one is saying it out loud. I saw a great believer in expressing what it is that you want, after spending far too many years not expressing what I really wanted. And being a little bit amazed that no one could read my mind. But anyway, so expressing what I wanted, and then having a bit of a plan. Now I'm a reasonably crap goal setter. So I'll put that out there because I've said that publicly before but I had a vision. And my vision still is I want to be on the AFL commission at some point. But I thought, well, what am I stepping stones and my stepping stones were I need to find my very first football board to jump on. And as it turned out, through arranged through networking, and networks, I became aware of an opportunity in Gippsland. And the Gippsland, AFL football and netball League was specifically recruiting female directors. So I put my hand up, and people would say are you from get started. Now I'm actually from Western Australia, they needed my skills. And they needed my skills, my background and agenda, as it turned out. So that was my first board and my first footy board. And I knew that once you're on a board, you can get on other boards. I wish it wasn't so but they were the ones who gave me my leg up into the AFL industry. And I knew that was once I was there, I had to really build my networks, build my profile, demonstrate over and over again, that I knew my staff and I could really add value for the communities that were in service of. And that's how it started.

Helga Svendsen 17:46

So Gippsland was a combined netball AFL?

Michelle Redfern 17:50

That's right. We were sitting across all of the clubs in that league. Yes. Yep.

Helga Svendsen 17:55

And you were particularly interested in the AFL side. But you also had the Netball side. Do you think that that helped get into that first one as well, like they needed your gender, your skills? Your experience?

Michelle Redfern 18:07

It's a good question, I suspect it will have added to my credibility that I knew sport, because I've been involved in sport PR for such a long time. So yes, I have no doubt that that was, that was part of it. However, they were certainly over indexing on business skills, less on sports skills. And I was in my interview, I was very, very passionate about this epiphany that I'd had about how, how wonderful it was to be able to bring my business skills into the sporting environment. And interestingly, one of my mentors around that time, because I'd set my cap at the AFL. She said, you

know, Michelle, I totally agree with you that we need more business skills, less football skills around boardroom tables, and we're talking about extraordinarily need the organisation's even just from a monetary exchange perspective. But she said, you know, you're not a footballer, you've never played footy. You've never, never been involved. And I said, Yeah, well, this is my job is to really demonstrate in this first role, how well I can do and justify for myself and every other woman who wants to be involved in what has been traditionally male dominated environments that we can bring value. We bring diversity of thought diversity of lived experience, other ideas, and can question the way things have always been done. I mean, I could go on about this for ages, but there was just a lot of value. But for me personally, at that time, I knew that I had a lot of work to do to build my cred, which meant I had to show up at a lot of things. I put my hand up for pretty much everything I said, we've got some money from the AFL and they want us to set up a representative team for the whole of Gippsland. And when I'll do it for a women's team, I'll do it. And Greg, the then president, he said you're sure? Spot on leave it with me, I'll do it. I had no idea what I was doing. But I did it. And then I did it again in my next role. And now I've got that experience. So just showing up and then saying yes to a whole bunch of things to gain new experience that was, which is always what I've done in my leadership career as well. That looks interesting. I might learn some stuff. So the same applied for me there.

Helga Svendsen 20:23

Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? Because part of your value to that boardroom, I would say is that you weren't from football? Like that's exactly the value that you add. So you can ask the inverted commas stupid questions, you can get people to explain how things are done around here, which sometimes, as they are then explaining, they wonder themselves why things are done that way.

Michelle Redfern 20:49

I've got this, you know, I will always have the I've never been a player stuff. So I will always be able to bring that up. But there's no doubt that as my experience continues to grow. So we have to bring other people in who can help us with different lived experience. So yeah, I really was, it was just so absolutely crystal clear. The benefit to sport of greater diversity on the boards.

Helga Svendsen 21:17

I mean, as I mentioned earlier, you've done so much work around gender equality. Why is gender equality important in sport?

Michelle Redfern 21:24

Because sport is business. So So there's two things that so go back and say, because people don't why sport, you know, I'm not an elite athlete never have been, I say sport has been always been a

part of my life, since I was a little person. So I can't imagine a life without sport in it. And I enjoy a whole range of sports. AFL is my particular passion area, or is a great vehicle for social change. I know including my own two children who are 31 and 28. I know that there are many people of all ages, and all walks of life that will believe the words that come out of a sports person's mouth more than they might believe some of our legislators, they've got credit. So I know that sports can be a great vehicle for social change. And frankly, there are so many people in sport. What I see is, and I've researched it, and I continue to research it, there is a glaring, glaring divide between those that have power and influence and make decisions and those who volunteer and do stuff that's kind of nice for free. Men still hold power, women still do a lot of stuff for free and it was interesting in my first foray into footy with my son's footy team, I will not be cutting up oranges, washing jumpers going in the canteen and look out, knock yourselves out whoever wants to do that, but it's not me because I'm so determined not to go be put into a gendered stereotype role. And that's what I want to do is break down, why because just like we know, diversity at all levels of leadership in all profit, and for purpose organisations means you've got greater opportunity to outperform the same for sport, sports, often, our lean organisations have very scrappy, big volunteer base. So we need innovative thinking, we need new thinking to keep evolving. And this last two years, there's never been a greater example of really well run sports organisations versus perhaps could be more diverse could be more innovative. Because organisation, there are some that have absolutely survived COVID and others that have not, and have done very, very poorly, when you can look at the composition of leadership and boards and say, there's a diverse range of people bringing a whole bunch of different ideas to our really big problem here versus a homogenous group that have always done the same thing the same way. Now, I'm being very binary there, because naturally, it's a lot more complex than that. But I want sport to survive and flourish because it is a really important part of society. But I don't want it to be the domain of just one group of people. And because at the heart of all this, it's not fair.

Helga Svendsen 24:13

Yeah, yes. Oh, them fightin words. Michelle will love it. Fantastic. Now, you said earlier that your vision was to be on the AFL commission. Is that still your your vision?

Michelle Redfern 24:27

I don't know. And I'm normally so absolutely certain about what I'm going to do determined is what my mother has said I was from the moment I was born. So the reason I want wanted to be the commissioner of the AFL was to shape the game and was to make it the best, the best game for all people. Now, there's actually a governance problem, in my opinion, and I don't think the commission necessarily has in terms of both I feel with the greatest of respect to the commissioners that they're not as visible as I would like to see. And I'm not seeing the innovation and the drive from those governors. And I'm seeing management take the lead on a whole bunch of stuff. And I don't, I can't see that changing in the short term. So I'm not going to go anywhere where I can have an impact, and I'm not going to invest time where I can have an impact. So maybe I'll have an impact in a

different way. So with your being an annoying, you know, advocate for women in sport and nipping at the heels of folk that, perhaps need to think differently about some things.

Helga Svendsen 25:34

While that's arrived, we will watch this space and just saying, you know, maybe you need to go and run the AFL on the management side, as opposed to being one of the commissioners.

Michelle Redfern 25:43

As my wife says, I'm, you know, I've been working for myself for a long time, I would be a very bad employee.

Helga Svendsen 25:50

Oh, well, you just remain being that annoying voice because we love you know, we know that in good governance, annoying voices are the ones we need. And we also know, in the continued fight for equality, diversity and inclusion, that the annoying voices are definitely needed. So all power to you in that I say.

Michelle Redfern 26:07

Thank you, thank you. But I'm determined to remain involved in football, a range of different capacities, including as a director, and I'm not a director at the moment. I'm having a hiatus at the moment. But you know that that is most definitely on my agenda.

Helga Svendsen 26:21

Excellent. Well, don't let that hiatus stay for too long. Oh, Michelle, so many wonderful things in this conversation. What are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Michelle Redfern 26:33

So the key points are number one, if you're an aspiring director, really step into that space right now and say, what can I get myself involved in, put your hand up and get yourself involved in a committee, no matter what it is, and start learning the ropes about governance, believe me, the opportunities are there. And they don't have to be onerous. So that would be number one. Number two, work out what your strengths are, and play to them, and talk about them with your mentors

and stakeholders. And number three, figure out what your gaps are. So you've got to learn about governance, and figure out your what your gaps are, and figure out what you're going to do about that. So that would be my first three for aspiring directors, or current directors, I want you to look beyond the group that you might ordinarily look at. As potential directors, start thinking about talent pipelines, committees, and subcommittees are really great ways to give women opportunity and experience. You know, I always say we've got to expose women to these environments, and give them the exposure to the people who are in the environments. So think about who you might bring onto your committees and start grooming, have a talent pipeline the same as we do in companies. So directors look beyond the normal that you might look to, and challenge your board recruitment companies to think more broadly, we want to see more women of colour. We want to see more First Nations women, we want to see more women full stop, but certainly those two groups are underrepresented.

Helga Svendsen 26:38

Absolutely. I've said it a few times say it again, that equality is just one part of the equation. If all we do is replace some of the white men on boards with old white men on boards with old white women, we haven't won we need that diversity as well. Yeah. Have you got a resource that you would like to share with the take on board community?

Michelle Redfern 28:29

I do. And it's, it's a book by one of my fabulous friends and also someone I'm in a business with Susan Collins, her book is called No Ceiling, No Walls and Helga I'm going to get you some copies. But I'm back up in Melbourne for you to give away one of your fabulous breakfasts. It's a really great business book to help you close what we call the missing 33% gap. So if you are light on business, strategic and financial acumen, it is a great book to start saying, here's how I might start to identify and close my gaps. It's a brilliant book about women's leadership, because a lot of leadership is still grounded in what men need when they start to receive to the C suite. And frankly what men need, they start to move up the career ladder. Women are already good at what women need is what men have been taught from the outset of their careers, the business of the business. So this is a great book.

Helga Svendsen 29:23

Ah, oh, well, just this year, we started the take on board book club, Michelle, No Ceiling, No Walls might end up as one of the books on Book Club for 2022. Oh, Michelle, thank you so much. I can't believe it's taken us this long to organize this time to chat to be on the podcast. But thank you so much for sharing your stories, for sharing your tips for sharing your wisdom with take onboard community today.

Michelle Redfern 29:47

My absolute pleasure and thanks for having me.