



Take on Board

Transcript – Jane Kennedy

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Jane Kennedy about how to get on a board and youth voices on a board. First, let me tell you about Jane. Jane is on the board of UN youth Australia and describes herself as a perpetual uni student social change advocate and believer in the transformative power of passionate young people. Through her work in the youth participation and international development space, she empowers young change makers with the opportunities, resources, ownership and networks to meaningfully shape their lives, communities and our future. Welcome to the take on board podcast, Jane.

Jane Kennedy 0:37

Thank you. I'm very excited to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:39

Oh, it is so awesome to have you. And I know that when I read that introduction, it's enough to make me want to know more. So I'm sure that our listeners will be feeling as well. So before we explore getting on a board and youth voices on a board, once we've heard that beautiful official bio for you, I'd love to hear a bit more say can you tell me what was young Jane like and when did you get your first inkling that you might end up as a board director?

Jane Kennedy 1:03

It's funny, actually. Because when you say young Jane, my mind obviously goes towards being a child and what I was like then, but I think in a sense, I still kind of am young Jane. I'm 22 years old. And so I think I'm very much still learning about myself in the world and where I fit into it. But in terms of when I was a kid, it probably depends on who you ask, to be honest, I like to think I was quite a fiery or let's say, passionate child. If you ask my mum, though, she'd probably tell you I was stubborn, which I think was challenging for her as a parent, but has certainly manifested today and the, you know, persistence and determination that I have in my work and in the courses that I'm passionate about. I also growing up always had this really strong sense of justice and equality. And again, I think as a kid that has a lot more to do with, you know, what my sister's got versus what I got and what I saw is fair, but these days has turned a lot more into just wanting to see a world and help create a world that is more just and more equal.

Helga Svendsen 2:08

How fabulous. We need we need more people like this in the world.

Jane Kennedy 2:13

Yeah, I think so. And I think we are seeing a lot of young people coming up with those sort of innate drivers, which is wonderful, in terms of wanting to be a board director, to be honest, like, you know, five years ago, it probably wasn't really on my radar. Even when I started uni, I always knew that I wanted to be a part of decision making processes and those conversations about important topics, but I hadn't thought about being on a board specifically. I think that that had a lot to do with sort of feeling like boards were operating in this very distant abstract space or in rooms with people who were a lot older, a lot more experienced or a lot more male than me. And so, I don't think the idea had really come to me because I had just never been involved in that space or I've been welcomed into that space, I suppose. But while studying in my undergrad degree, I started a youth program with the Jane Goodall Institute Australia. And as I built this role within the organization, and it started to carry more significance, I found myself working more and more with the board of directors. And that included getting to know a couple of the amazing women who were on the board, Michelle Shepherd, who obviously you've spoken to before, and Zahra bending, and they really took their time to support me and and what I was trying to do in the organization. I also had a mom who was serving on the board herself, which gave me some insight at home into how the board operates and what was involved in the role. And so I think those early interactions were when I started to feel like there would be a lot of value for the organization and for young people if we increased the youth voice within our organization. And so I started to look for opportunities where I could get involved so that I could learn more about it and then hopefully as well create some opportunities for other young people.

Helga Svendsen 4:00

So you've mentioned you're on the board of UN Youth Australia. Can you tell us a little bit about that organization and what it does?

Jane Kennedy 4:06

UN Youth Australia really is a fantastic organization. I joined as an independent director. So I've been learning a lot about what they do myself over the course of this year. But UN Youth Australia is it's a national completely youth led organization whose mission is to educate and empower young Australians on global issues. All of the activities are completely run by young people for young people. And all of the programs and activities that we run are dedicated to empowering young Australians to be engaged and involved on a global scale. The entire organization is run by volunteers, aged 16 to 25. And yet we're really committed to empowering and engaging young people through education, leadership opportunities, and all levels of the organization.

Helga Svendsen 4:53

So you've told us a little bit about the organization itself. Can you tell me how that board operates?

Jane Kennedy 5:00

Yeah, sure. So I joined the board at the end of last year, I applied as a independent board director. So we have four independent board directors who sit on the board each year. And our goal is to be bringing in some outside expertise into the organization. But it's also involves a lot of learning how you and youth runs and learning about what it is to be involved in a board. Many of the people on the board come from like law and economics type backgrounds, but it is very diverse. And that's one of the things that I found amazing about you and use is I've learned so much about diversity and inclusion within an organization from the ways that they run their board and the organization more broadly. It's been wonderful. I've worked on a couple of the subcommittees that we have there. So I'm on the HR subcommittee and the welfare subcommittee. We also have ones that deal with finance and auditing and ethics. And then we have sort of ad hoc task forces and teams as needed for different projects. But it's amazing because the board itself is also completely youth run. What's been amazing to me is just seeing how effectively a organization can be run when it's completely run by young people. I think it's something that I talk about a lot and I'm very passionate about, but still find myself getting surprised and amazed at that. As a youth organization. We can have all of the fun and the community that comes with being run by young people, but also be incredibly professional and very on the ball in terms of legal and financial responsibilities.

Helga Svendsen 6:27

That is fantastic to hear. You know, we were talking before we started recording about other organizations. My first board was the YWCA and we have a requirement for four of our directors to be aged 30 or under, but not the entire board, but your entire board is 25 years and under. You said that it's taught you a lot about diversity and inclusion at the board level. And diversity and inclusion are important for any board. So what are some of the lessons that you've learned that might be useful for other people for their boards?

Jane Kennedy 6:55

I think what's been interesting about you and youth is it's like inclusion isn't so much something that is in, like our policies and procedures. It's more around the culture of the organization. And I think that's something that they've really nailed on the head. And I think it has a lot to do as well with just the fact that young people's leadership styles, Do you often tend to lean towards being very inclusive and open and collaborative. And I think that I see that in the work that you and us is doing. And so I think that engaging young people in running your boards and running your organization is a really wonderful way to start that process of changing the culture in your organization to have a

focus on celebrating diversity and improving inclusion. And I think doing it in a way that isn't tokenistic, but is very genuine and can actually change the fabric of the work you do and the things that you achieve

Helga Svendsen 7:48

Is there any of the practical suggestions for people for their boards about how to do that so that it is really genuine, that diversity and inclusion?

Jane Kennedy 7:56

We're very mindful in when we're creating, like what within the board itself, like how we want to have a balance, whether it's, you know, agenda, whether it's background, rural versus Metropolitan location, you know, all these different ways that people might be able to bring different diverse experiences or knowledge. Whenever we're creating a event or an activity or selection committee or whatever, we're making sure that we are having conversations around who is making up this group of people, and how can we make sure that it's reflective of Australia and useful broadly? And so, you know, obviously, we have a lot of discussions that a lot of organizations have around quotas and around, you know, the best ways to measure how we can be across all the different areas that we want to include. What I found is the main benefit is having those conversations every time we are creating a new activity or event or committee, and making sure that something that's always on everyone's mind is how can we make sure that this thing that we're creating is inclusive and diverse.

Helga Svendsen 8:53

When you put a diverse group of people together? It often means that the conversations from group a more robust and it's one of the really valuable things from a diverse group of people that can sometimes make things even more challenging for the chair of your board. So what have you observed about some of those robust conversations and maybe how the chair brings them together into in a constructive way?

Jane Kennedy 9:16

Our chair is wonderful. I'm definitely a big fan of how she runs things. She's been incredible and like a wonderful teacher for me and how boards work. We always have a very big agenda when we have our board meetings and they often drag on for a long time. But Anne and I think the board more broadly a very supportive of that robust discussion. I think it's how we come up with some of our best ideas or some of our most collaborative suggestions. They've created a space where everyone no matter if they are an independent director, or they've been involved with the organization for a long time, welcome and invited to share their thoughts on whatever it is we're discussing and where there are differences of opinions or that sort of robust exchanging of ideas. We're, as a group, I think

we're very collaborative and very supportive of each other and very respectful of each other's different opinions. And so we've been able to have discussions where even though we have different ideas, we are able to reach some kind of compromise and really investigate and understand each other's perspectives and point of views. And we're usually able to come to some kind of agreement. And you know, where we struggle with that we're very good at looking outside and consulting and finding out best practice or information from people who are bigger experts and whatever it is that we're discussing, and using that to inform discussions and choices as well.

Helga Svendsen 10:37

It sounds like there is a there's a very positive constructive culture around that, which I'm guessing comes from quite a bit of trust in the boardroom. Now, you've only been on the board for 12 months or so. As a newcomer coming in from the outside as an independent director, how did you build trust with your co directors?

Jane Kennedy 10:56

There's this thing that I find in all these organizations. I've been involved with, which is that there is always this incredible sense of community and relationship between the teams that I work in. And I think that that's one of the things that we're really good at balancing is being professional and getting the work done that we need to get done. But also having time and space for a bit of banter, a bit of fun, a bit of relationship building. And I think that the fact that we have those connections with each other means that there is that trust, and obviously, you know, coming from it, like you said, externally, I was one of the sort of newbies in the group, and a lot of them knew each other really well. But the environment was always incredibly welcoming. And, you know, I never felt like it I was intruding if I had to ask a silly question, or, you know, had to clarify things and, and I think that just that sense of like welcoming and supporting me, particularly in those early months when I was really trying to figure out what was going on, was really key to building the trust, like both ways between us and the other thing is I Everyone, there is volunteers. Everyone is studying and or working and often has other roles that they're juggling. And I think that there's just a lot of support within the organization of seeing you as a person, not just the role that you're doing. And so wanting to get to know you and wanting to support you, so that you can, you know, be thriving in all areas of your life and delivering as a board director.

Helga Svendsen 12:22

So what would your advice be to other organizations about what they can do to support their directors or their boards for that meaningful contribution? From the diverse and inclusive boards? We've talked about some of them building relationships and so on, what would be your tips for ensuring areas that meaningful contribution?

Jane Kennedy 12:42

Well, you know, I think that I can talk to an extent, but um, you know, I think it's important to recognize that we talk about diversity, like it's this one thing, and exactly, and I think it's so important for us to be recognizing that there is diversity within and that I can definitely speak to my experiences and what it's like to be a woman on the board or a young woman on a board. But in order to get informed opinions for people who come from other backgrounds, it's really about including the voices and having discussions with the people who you want to be engaging with your board. And I think as well, kind of on that point, like I talk a lot about young people as this broad group, and it can sometimes I think, maybe seem like we're lumping young people all together into this big group without consideration for the differences that exists within that. And, you know, I think that when I talk about young people itself, there's incredible diversity there. Every young person has their own experiences and backgrounds that should be taken into consideration when we're talking to them. And so I think that for an organization, if they're wanting to engage with young people or engage in diversity, they should do so in a way that like really embraces the varied and diverse nature of young people or, you know, okay or whoever it is that you're wanting to include

Helga Svendsen 13:59

Thinking about your board then. So it's all made up of young people, people that are 25 years or younger. And I know so my first board, as I said the YWCA had a range of ages on that board, but we're all women. So there was no diversity in terms of gender. So what's your view around that level of diversity for your board? Because it's all young people? Should they be some older people on your board?

Jane Kennedy 14:26

That's a cool question. I like that. I think that that comes down to an organization and what it is that their mission is, what their values are, and what it is that they're wanting to achieve. I'm all about having a broad range of voices. But I think that what we found with you and us is that it's an organization that exists to serve and educate empower young people and the people who are best informed to do that are their fellow young people. And I think though, that we operate in a way that recognizes that we are young, we don't have all the experience and we definitely don't have all the knowledge and so we are very much open to including and bringing in expertise and going out and consulting and finding answers to things when we need. And so I think that it does come down to a lot like an organizational level what it is that you're standing for and what it is that you're wanting to do. YWCA completely understand and can see why you benefit from having an old female board and that those are the people who are best place to be making informed decisions about programs for women, in particularly young women or marginalized women. And so for us, you know, having a board that may is made up completely of young people is the way that allows our organization to flourish the largest. We certainly look outside expertise when it's needed.

Helga Svendsen 15:43

I confess with YWCA. I still believe that it should be an all women board but I am somewhat challenged by it. Because of the work and research I do around diversity. And knowing that diversity leads to better outcomes. I do challenge myself a little bit about whether that is the best outcome. I'm still there that it is at the moment. But it's only been more recently that I've thought, Oh, God, maybe we should think more, which is exactly why I wanted to ask you that question as well.

Jane Kennedy 16:09

I think as well, for me, it's kind of like if the purpose of the organization is to be providing opportunities for young people, one of the most meaningful ways we can do that is by providing the opportunities for young people at a board level. There are so many wonderful organizations out there that offer positions for people of all ages and different experiences to serve. And to have that experience. There's a much more limited amount of organizations who provide those opportunities for young people. And so I think for you and us if we're wanting to engage and empower young people to be leaders now and in the future, giving them that it's like experience in governance is so important. And we want a few organizations that provides that opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 16:49

So I know for example, the YWCA has a quota on young women. I'm pretty sure YMCA also has a quota on young people. I know the foundation for young Australians as you would expect They don't have a quota. They certainly have a very strong policy around young voices on their board. Obviously your organization, you in youth, yeah, there are others that you know of that specifically provide prizes for young people?

Jane Kennedy 17:15

I know that there are some more out there I'm trying to think about this YWCA was the other one that I had looked at in terms of, you know, having young people on the board. There are definitely more out there that have positions for young people. And I've seen before advertise organizations that probably don't have quotas, but I'm looking to open up to having more younger voice in board positions. And I think as well, like when we're talking about getting young people involved in governance, having them as board directors is one way to do that. There's a whole range of ways that you can get young people involved. And I think that an organization benefits if young people aren't just involved at one level, but throughout the organization. And so whether it's through subcommittees or task forces they boards have or through operations and exec level sort of positions. I think that, you know, a lot of organizations have opened up spaces like that the young people as well, which is really wonderful to see, I think the next step is perhaps just making sure that young people are aware of those opportunities and feel like they're accessible. Because that's something that I've experienced with some of the young people, I know that they kind of here and

then there's these positions that exist elsewhere and bridging that gap so that they know that they exist, and that you know, they have the experience or the perspectives to apply for those positions is really important.

Helga Svendsen 18:29

So previously, you had been involved in the Jane Goodall Institute of Australia, in some of their youth led activities that gave you interaction with the board, and now you're on a board of a youth led organization. I'm just wondering if you've got any reflections Now, having sat at the board table, about your interactions with the JGIA board and your observations about the work that they do. Now that you've got these potentially slightly new perspective?

Jane Kennedy 18:57

Yeah, definitely. It was fun, engaging With the board with JGIA, because I was kind of, you know, going about creating this fairly new thing within the organization here in Australia. And so I think the board as well was figuring out how they would engage with what it was we were creating. And I think reflecting on being someone who was engaging with the board, but not sitting on a board as I was with JGIA, I value so much more the people in the JGIA board who took the time to provide me with mentoring, or guidance or support in the things that I was wanting to do and made themselves incredibly accessible. And I think that's something that I've really valued and hope that I can continue in this role that I'm doing with you and UN Youth Australia, but also in other roles that I do on boards or executives. I think for me, as a leader on a on a board, your goal should be serving the people in the organization that you're trying to run. And I think a big part of that is making yourself accessible and open to mentoring and reaching out and providing guidance to your teams and the volunteers in your organization. I think as well, it's just given me a much deeper appreciation for what the board was doing. You know, I know that they were having meetings and stuff, but I was often, you know, having fun writing my program and perhaps a little bit ignorant to all the things that they were doing. So I certainly do have an increased appreciation for the things that that would juggling and the decisions they were making. And I think as well, it's helped me understand, like the difference between board director roles versus the more operational roles that you have in other parts of the organization. And I think being a board director, I see a lot now how you do do a lot less of the, you know, hands on day to day running of things, and you're very much there to provide that strategy or direction or wisdom, in consultation with the rest of your organization. So there's lots of things that I've learned to that and I mean, I still reach out to people on the board of JGIA the questions or like tips or you know, asking them to direct me to something and like continuing to learn from them and the work that they do.

Helga Svendsen 20:59

And how does your board then, I mean, this is a common challenge for any board, how does your board make sure that they stay in the governance space for those conversations rather than getting into the nuts and bolts of an organization?

Jane Kennedy 21:11

Hmm, I think that, I mean, a lot of the people who are on the board have come through the organization. And so I know really well how the organization operates. And I think a lot of them have also come through the National Executive sort of stream. And so they've worked very closely with the board, but from outside the board. And so then stepping into the role of board directors, you know, I think that it seems to me that they've had a pretty good understanding of what the role entails and what the responsibilities are. I also know a lot of the students who are on the board have backgrounds in law and economics and did a pretty well place to understand the incredible responsibility that comes with governance, and they've done an incredible job of imparting a lot of that on to those of us who've joined as independent directors or from different backgrounds.

Helga Svendsen 21:56

It is a common challenge for all sorts of organizations. And I think in some ways, it's one we're potentially a youth led board might actually pay more attention to these things just to make sure they do stay in the governance space. So that's fabulous to hear.

Jane Kennedy 22:11

Yeah, I think it's good. And I think one of the other great things with young people is like, we're, I think youth led organizations are very innovative and willing to try new things. And it's often a very cool space for new ideas to be trialed. And I know that you know, like using technology to stay involved with volunteers and organization is a really big thing that you and youth does. slack is incredibly active and all the volunteers throughout the organization are involved in the executive and the board and really put in an effort to make sure that the space stays really engaging and open so that everyone feels like they're involved in the day voices heard. I talked very positively about youth led organizations. It's also important to acknowledge that all organizations have their flaws and challenges and things that we're working through. From my experience you and us is doing a really great job of towing that line between governance of being accessible and An open and engaged with everyone in the organization.

Helga Svendsen 23:03

OK there's been so many fabulous tips in here and hearing your experience of working in a youth lead organization and your experience of governance in there. I think it's great for people to hear and role model that for other young people to get involved in governance. It's something I'm always trying to champion. But also some tips for those of us that aren't in youth lead organizations, but how we can some really good tips and tricks in there for, for having good practices for diversity inclusion in our boards. So, in closing, then I'm just wondering, what are the main points that you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Jane Kennedy 23:40

Yeah, we will cover lots of things, but there's so much more that we could discuss. So I think definitely seek information and find out more because there's a lot more out there. But in terms of the conversation today, I just think you know whether you're a young person who's listening to this, or you're someone who's looking to get young people more involved in your organization, remembering that Young people have an incredible amount of potential and can add immense value to your board and all levels of your governance. Often, what's just needed is the opportunity for them to put their hand up and get involved, and perhaps some guidance on how they can navigate their way in these spaces and have meaningful contributions to your organization.

Helga Svendsen 24:21

And do you have a resource that you'd like to share with the community, a book, a TED talk, a podcast? Is there anything you'd like to share with the community as a result?

Jane Kennedy 24:29

Well, obviously like UN Youth Australia has a bit of information on its website. In particular, we're currently advertising for independent directors for 2020. To get definitely direct young people if they interested in getting involved, or if there's any organizations, you want to see a model of like a youth director type role. Take a look at that. But I was involved JGIA, the chair of our board Paul Smith has founded the future directors Institute, and I know that I've poked around a lot on their website and there's a lot of good resources there for organizations and for young people. definitely have a look at that. And also just I think for young people looking within your networks and seeing what organizations you have relationships with would be really valuable. And then the last thing, this is kind of unrelated, but I've actually just been finishing Michelle Obama's book Becoming. And I've been really amazed with some of the lessons in there and leadership, in particular, like the benefits and value of engaging young voices. So I recommend reading that because I've enjoyed that.

Helga Svendsen 25:26

Fantastic. And I check with you, when do applications close for your board

Jane Kennedy 25:32

November 1

Helga Svendsen 25:33

Folks, we are recording this late October. I'll see what I can do to get this out sooner rather than later. But by the time you're listening to what people you probably don't have too much time. So get on it real quick. And I'll make sure there is a link to that in the show notes. Also. Last but not least, what a couple of actions that you can suggest to people to take following this conversation?

Jane Kennedy 25:56

If you're an organization or if you're someone who's on a board. would be saying to first of all, have conversations with your co workers and encourage, you know that increased and meaningful youth participation within your organization at all levels that especially on the board. And then I'd also just say like second, on a personal level, as a professional, you have the opportunity to reach out and to mentor young people in your field, young people that you meet, and to welcome them into the governance space. And I think young people would really benefit from that. I know I really did. And then for any young people who are listening, who are interested in getting involved on boards, I would be saying, like, apply for opportunities as much as you can. I learned a lot. Don't think that you can't do it just because it hasn't been done before. An organization might not currently have a space, especially for young people, but you can create that space. And I also be saying to seek guidance and feedback from the people in your network. And also just always remembering the value that you have in your voice and in your perspective and that while you might not have the experience or the backgrounds of others, People on boards the viewpoint that you bring and the experiences that you do have are incredibly valuable.

Helga Svendsen 27:04

What a beautiful point to end on. I could not agree more. If we are going to encourage diversity of boards because we know it's better. We need all sorts of diversity, including young voices. Thank you so much for joining me today on the podcast. There are some beautiful pearls of wisdom in there that I know the community will take a lot from. So thank you, Jane.

Jane Kennedy 27:21

Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.