

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 196

Transcript – Julia Spicer challenges you to hear all voices in the boardroom



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Julia Spicer about ensuring we hear all the voices in the boardroom. Before we start the discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and I pay respects to elder's past and present and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who might be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I support the Uluru statement from the heart and I encourage others in the take on board community to do the same. Now let me introduce Julia. Julia is on the boards of Motherland Australia, GEN Australia, the Queensland Government Innovation Advisory Council and Tie Up the Black Dog Committee She has formerly been on the boards of Australian Land Management Group, Queensland Small Business Advisory Council, Regional Development Australia, YWCA Queensland yet another white woman Hooray and Care Goondiwindi and Goondiwindi Training and Technology. Julia grew up in a small rural community and learned from an early age the value of everyone contributing. Everyone would volunteer regardless of age, skill or ability. Working shoulder to shoulder with her family and others gave her a strong sense of community and of banding together to help. Julia founded, Engage and Create Consulting on these principles. Today she sits on several business and community boards, and these help ensure that she has her finger on the pulse of what's happening, where original woman's voice needs to be heard. She has been shortlisted for a number of prestigious business awards and is recognised as a compelling authority on women in rural business roles. She is currently Queensland's Chief Entrepreneur, something I'm also going to ask about because I'm intrigued. Welcome to the take on board podcast Julia.

Julia Spicer 1:55

Helga, thanks so much for having me today.

Helga Svendsen 1:58

It is awesome to have you here. And before we talk about hearing all the voices in the boardroom, as always, I would love to dig just a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Julia, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Julia Spicer 2:14

Absolutely. So thank you very much. And I'd also like to say I'm coming from Goondiwindi today, on Bigambul country in southwest Queensland, and acknowledge the beautiful welcome that you gave to everybody at the start of this podcast. So I grew up in western Queensland, I grew up north of Roma on my family's sheep and cattle property, and went to a one teacher school. So there I was one of 17 at the school from grade one to grade seven. And this piece of community contribution that you included in the introduction of me is really I guess, where my understanding of the role that every individual plays in the bigger piece of community really started. So I remember being young Julia helping at theater restaurants and serving people their dinner, I remember helping it tennis events and cricket days at our local community hall where it really didn't matter whether you were 6, 16, or 66, you had a job, that was part of helping the day occur. And that was beneficial for everybody in the community for whatever it was that we were doing. And I think, certainly from a family perspective, we have always grown up knowing that we were part of something bigger than ourselves as an individual. And also something bigger than just our family that our family needed to support others, or us all to have a really vibrant community, a really rich tapestry of people and families in our in our rural area. So I really do acknowledge a lot of this relatively small community that I grew up in, as playing a huge role in the bigger puzzle or picture might be.

Helga Svendsen 4:04

Julia, it's so interesting to hear some of your background, and it seems to be a common theme. I don't know, maybe it's people that come to the take on board community. Maybe it's women in the boardroom. I'm not sure, but we hear this community contribution a lot from people. Where did they come from for your family?

Julia Spicer 4:24

Oh, that's a really good question. Helga. I think it came from two places. So if I think about my Dad's side of the family, we had the farm after Dad's parents were on it. So it was a generational property. And so, you know, everybody had a role. People had lived in that community for a long time. And so there was an expectation that the family was part of things. So I certainly think from Dad's side of the family, it was that history of living in an area with not a lot of people and so everybody needs to be part of something. And probably from my mom's side, she was a city girl who married the a farmer and moved to western Queensland. And she was really involved with the church. So I actually think there was maybe a piece of that for her. It was her upbringing as quite a church going family

where she grew up and the family she grew up in, that really brought that piece of it. So kind of a lovely combination really around this need to, to give this need to contribute to something greater than yourself. And I think that really set us up myself and my siblings to look at well, what does that mean for us in terms of what we want to study the boards that were involved with how we want to volunteer and really show up and contribute to the world.

Helga Svendsen 5:45

Well, then I'm also interested like, for the people that I speak to that have that really strong community connection, and the giving connection, as it sounds like has come for quite strongly in your family. I'm really interested now to hear about this connection with being Queensland's Chief Entrepreneur. Because often it's like, oh, community sector boards contributing to the boards, Chief Entrepreneur conjures up a bit of a different image for me, maybe I've got the wrong image. But I'm really interested then in that, will I tell us what that role even is? Because I'm not entirely sure. And how you landed in that and how maybe this community connection connects to that as well, if at all?

Julia Spicer 6:24

Absolutely. So yes, I am Queensland's fifth Chief Entrepreneur, the role has been around for about seven years, I'm the first regionally based Chief Entrepreneur and the role is really set up to advocate and champion for founders for small business people for the innovation ecosystem, as they call it, across Queensland. And so it's really about what do people need to be able to grow and scale their business? How do we help connect them to what it is that they need. So it might be funding, it might be staff, it might be connections, it might be support, to help them export overseas, but really to be able to kind of advocate and champion for people in this entrepreneurial space. So with that in mind, and thinking about the fact that I come from a, you know, a rural and regional background where we don't always have everything at our fingertips, we need to be fairly innovative about how we're going to solve a problem that we might have, we need to think differently about how we're going to work together to achieve something, we need to look at the resources that we have on hand and how we might use that. Often. Innovation comes at a time of crisis when things aren't going well. Again, most of rural and regional Australia are used to their fair share of challenges. And so when we think about it in that way, you know, I'm the least techie entrepreneur, I know. And yet, if I think about the values, the way that I look at this problem, how I look at solving problems for myself and others, that's really been how in the last 10 or 15 years, I've started consulting businesses, I've grown other businesses, we've partners, we've developed things, we've sold businesses. So it's been because I've seen that I have a problem. And if it's a problem for me, it's likely to be a problem for others. So if I can solve something for myself, I'm also going to solve it for other women starting a consulting business in a regional area, whatever that might look like. And so that's kind of really how I started my life in owning businesses and starting and founding businesses. I often joke that, you know, I didn't realize I was entrepreneurial, I just thought I was scrappy, you know, because that's kind of the language that we use more so, which is a theme for me through any of my kind of representation or roles, is what I found was I ended up at a table as the regional representative, or a particular cohort of people, whether it's women or the region's more broadly.

And so for the last couple of years, I've been sitting on what's called the Innovation Advisory Council for Queensland Government was established to really support and make sure that all of the voices were being heard from across the state in relation to this innovation ecosystem. And so I was there really is the regional voice. And so it's a voluntary role. I get to use my networks across all of Queensland to touch base and see well, you know, this is what's happening for us and Gunda windy are using the same thing long range, what does it look like for you, Cairns, Rockhampton, what's happening in your part of the world with this new industry that's starting to be developed. And I can pull those thoughts and ideas together and take them to these statewide conversations and meetings that I then get to be part of and so that was really I guess, how I ended up around this Innovation Council. And then from there Hello again, I was asked to consider whether I would be interested in taking on this role as as Queensland's Chief Entrepreneur.

Helga Svendsen 10:08

That makes so much sense. Actually, once you take us through the story, it's your get in and do it person who's a problem solver. Even though at the outset, you're like, oh, how does that fit together?

Julia Spicer 10:18

Yeah, I think so just on that Helga, if I can, I think that really identifies and this is something that you would have had many conversations with other podcast, guests before around the importance of language, you know, and being really clear around, what are we actually talking about. And so what entrepreneur means for some is black T shirts, skinny jeans, nerdy techie kind of person in downtown San Francisco. That's one definition of an entrepreneur. And we know that there's a whole range of other people that are doing entrepreneurial activity, who may or may not identify with that kind of image and language. And so I think the other part that I can play then, is to kind of help bridge this language barrier sometimes or, or act as a bit of a translator where I go, yep, I get what you're talking about downtown Brisbane. And that makes complete sense, here is how the rest of the world will understand it, this is the way we need to describe it. This is what's going to connect people to what it is that you're trying to do. This is the language that they use. And you you know that from the work around the board table is language can be our greatest lever and our biggest undoer sometimes if we're not actually thinking about how we're using it.

Helga Svendsen 11:38

Well, you have segwayed for me beautifully. Let's turn to that then. So thinking about how we ensure all the voices are heard in the boardroom. Maybe from your experience, you can tell us a story about either how your voice was heard, and maybe what we can learn from that, or how you've allowed other voices to be heard. Where should we start?

Julia Spicer 12:04

So perhaps we could look at it in terms of were some of the things I needed to overcome and still have to overcome on a regular basis. And for me, I grew up in an agricultural community. And then I went to work in an agricultural community. And so I was very often the youngest person in the room by decades, I was very often the only woman in the room. And I was very often there with some supposes level of experience or technical experience I was needing to be sharing. And that was fairly confronting. And it was particularly challenging to work out how was it that I wanted to be seen around the table and how was I going to show up, I needed to be really careful, I didn't fall into the perceived daughter, granddaughter, nice role of these older guys around the table, you know, it's not a bad thing. But that wasn't necessarily where I needed to position myself. I needed to be really careful. I didn't come into blokey and try and be like one of the fellas around the table, when that's not my usual way of doing things, I was very aware that I needed to work out how I could stay authentically me around the table, knowing that I had something to offer. And also knowing there was a whole lot of experience I didn't have around the table either, and that everybody comes with their own experience and what they want to contribute. But that did take me a good five or six years, I think to be able to really be grounded in what it was that I was there for, and what they were expecting from me and what I wanted to really do. And so that meant, in some circumstances, I was probably quieter than I needed to be for a while. Quiet. It's probably not how people would describe me around the table now. But I think it was getting really clear on what what was the purpose? Why was I there? Particularly if I'd been asked to be part of a committee or a board or something, you know, they were asking me because they saw something in me. I might not have seen it myself just yet. But I needed to hold on to the fact that somebody else saw it and that there was value in that. And sometimes the value and the difference is because we live somewhere differently. We've got a different family set up we've got different life experiences. And for me, that's now the really important piece to think about is I don't want to sit around a table where everybody looks like me sounds like me, has similar upbringing to me. Because chances are, we're all going to think the same. And that's actually not helpful because we are not, I am not the only representation of community, or business or entrepreneurship. And so I want to look around the table and be like, Okay, well, who's here older than me? Who's here younger than me? Who's here with a different religion than me who grew up in a different country than me, who's sitting here as a First Nations member when I'm not. There are a few ommittees that I'm on now where we've done very well. But every now and again, we go, oh, what would the blokes say if they were in this room? Because actually, they're not here. Now, I want to make sure that I can look around the table and see a range of voices. And we know the sayings, you know, you don't want to be the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room, all of those kinds of things. Because the reality is what our communities look like, 40, 50, 30 years ago, are very different to how they look now, and will be very different to how they look in the next 30 years. And so we need to have those voices really heard.

Helga Svendsen 15:35

Okay, oh, gosh, there's two alleyways I want to go down. One is about bringing and hearing those diverse voices in the room. But before we get there, you talked about being really conscious and mindful of how you're seen and how you want to show up. I'm interested if you can, maybe talk us

through your first board that you joined, and how you thought about it there versus the most recent board that you've joined. Because I love that consciousness. How do I want to be seen? How do I want to show up? And I'm guessing, maybe I'm wrong, but I'm guessing that's also developed over the years. So yeah, can you give us an example of first versus most recent?

Julia Spicer 16:14

Absolutely. So one of the first boards I was involved with, I was actually probably there as the staff member more than the board director. So I was reporting to a board. And that was a new thing for me. So it was being very clear around what I needed from the board, what I needed from these directors to give me instruction, so that I could then go on, and you know, that piece around direction versus the operation side of things. So making sure that I wasn't running off making all of these decisions that really weren't mine to make. So being very clear on role and structure, and making sure that people felt valued to be at the table. So I could go off and make all the decisions by myself, whether they'd be good or not a whole other conversation. But if those people were there to do a job, and their job was to give me direction, I actually needed to ask for that. And I needed to allow them to do that, because they were volunteering their time and energy to be on this board. And I can't remember where I heard the phrase about people join a committee because they want to do something. And they'll often leave because they're not given a job, or they're not asked to contribute in any way. And so my first board was really making sure I was actually ensuring that people who were giving me jobs were given the chance to direct and be part of something. I think the first board that I was ever on, or the first committee I was part of was a rugby league club in western Queensland and a community where I was working, and it was really around they needed numbers. So I'd go to the football games more so for the social thing than actually watching the football. But again, they needed support to do some fundraising. I've got a bit of gumption, and I'm happy to hit people up to buy a raffle ticket. And so that ended me up on the committee to support and again, it was that whole, how do we help something we needed that committee, we needed that club in our region, and so they needed support. So it was that I could offer help and assistance. In terms of the most recent board I've joined. It's also one of the ones I'm most excited about. And it's the Motherland Australia board. So Stephanie Trethewey from Tasmania, she's Australia's Rural Woman of the Year at the moment, it was really a startup it was her business. And what she's done over the last little while, is formalise it into a not for profit charity. But you know, she's brought on this board of non executive directors. So she's really in the stage of handing over role and responsibility to this group of people from all over Australia. And so I was invited to be part of that board, partly from with a governance background, so to help with some of the governance side of things, and to, as you said, help make sure that we can still be doing things. So governance, I think, is a really important component to any business and not for profit. And we need to make sure that it's used and used well, so that we can do things so that we've got a really clear process. But it shouldn't be tripping us up from doing the good work that we're doing, if we're really clear on what it is that we do. And so motherland, Australia, you know, it's basically a virtual online mother's group for people from around Australia. So it's a definite need. It aligns for me in terms of supporting rural and regional women. I don't have kids myself, but I can be there and I can support others and I can use my networks and my skill set and experience to be able to help really drive the work that Steph and the board now want to do.

Helga Svendsen 19:39

Interesting. And well, there's two things there a I just happen to listen to a podcast over the weekend with Stephanie on it talking about Motherland. I think it was the future women podcast, I think so I just saw this in the notes prior. I'm like, Oh, I've just heard about that organization. And it's even interesting to hear you're bringing your governance wisdom to the boardroom and and in terms of the diversity in the boardroom, you don't have kids, that's actually a great voice to have in that boardroom, because I'm guessing most of the people involved in the organization do have kids, because it's a virtual mothers club, basically. So I'm interested, then, when you've been the first woman, or the first young person, or the first whatever, in the boardroom, how have you then brought those other voices in? And when you do bring them in? What do we then need to do to make sure that it's an inclusive conversation? And not just the same old conversation with a couple of different voices?

Julia Spicer 20:35

Yeah, that's a really good question. Helga. And I always assume positive intent, right, let's assume positive intent. And so let's assume that people aren't inviting others, not because they don't want them never, because they actually don't know them. Or they don't have networks into it, or into a particular group, or demographic, or whatever it might be. So it is really important for me, and particularly now, because I do have a bit of a profile. And I have, I am pretty well known in the regional space. And one of the reasons why I was really happy to take on the chief entrepreneurs role actually wants to be able to show that there's intelligent life form out here. And so part of that is me not being the only person. So I'm really conscious that I don't have to be the only one invited to things so I can't go have you met Helga, you know, I'd love to sit on this board. But you know, you probably don't need me, you need somebody further west, do you know, this person from Charleville, or this person from Emerald. So, you know, I'm really grateful that I have a really good network. I know a lot of people who are looking to do similar things to some of the activities I get to be part of. And so it is quite simply as much as sharing it. So you know, I believe generosity of spirit is a really important thing. And I think I'm a pretty generous person. And one of the things that I'm generous with is my networks. And I think often we probably are regionally we just don't really consider it as being a strength. It's just what we do on an everyday basis. Now, if I'm asked to do something, I think about what can I actually bring to the table? Is this my jam? Am I a good person to be able to talk about this? Or is there somebody better? And if I know that somebody who's better at it, I'm happy to do this, I'd love to come and speak at your luncheon. But have you met Helga like, this is her jam, this is all she talks about all of the time, he really should maybe think about inviting her or it's and so yes, I would love to come and can I bring a guest and I'd love to bring my friend Helga along because this is actually a lot of the space that she works in. So they're probably a couple of other things. And then the other piece for me is I think we need to be really careful about who stayed at the table too long. So if I'm sitting at a table, and I've been there for a while, I might still love it, I actually don't need to be there anymore. I'm taking the seat that somebody else could take. And for me, I reckon if I've done three years, somewhere, and I haven't achieved what I thought I was gonna achieve, it ain't gonna happen. So I need to bail and let somebody else step in and do what it is that they want to do. So that's probably the other piece for me is I give myself deadlines of

how long I should stay somewhere, as much as possible, try and invite others to. And honestly, that's partly because that's how I ended up in some of the rooms, I had beautiful women who are five or 10 or 15 years older than me, who quite literally were around the table and invited me to the table as well. And so now I'm very much paying that forward or paying it back or just doing it because I was afforded those opportunities as well.

Helga Svendsen 23:41

Very practical things in there, including moving on when needs be. So we've opened the door or pushed people through the door or what have made space for others. How do we learn ensure that those boardrooms or other rooms, hear those voices? So they're not just there, they're really included and heard. What's your advice there?

Julia Spicer 24:04

Yeah, that's a really good question. Helga. And I mean, I'd be keen on your thoughts for this as well. In my experience, some of that is around, making sure we've got a really good chair for the chair is making sure that they are drawing out those voices. So it's not unlikely that the first meeting, the new board member is going to be quite quiet or might not want to throw opinions in. So hopefully the chair has played a role to make sure that the new board member has had some conversations with other board members before the meeting, that the chair has said that look, I'm going to call on you and if you ever made a comment Hellyer I'm going to giving you a heads up that I am going to ask for your opinion or ideas at different times. So So I think it is around you know making sure that the chairs really welcoming and really engaging new people from the beginning. We don't want a new board member to sit in for five meetings and not saying anything, that's not a good start. Because if you haven't said much at the first meeting, it's going to be really hard to engage in future meetings. And also, I think we do need to be really clear if we're the new person around the table, we need to think of something to get ourselves into the conversation. So whether it's having a question that we can ask on a particular agenda item, whether it's posing a question of something or having a comment on a report that we've seen, but it's a little bit on both sides, we need the chair and the other directors to draw it out of us. But equally we need if we're sitting around a table, we're there, because they want us to contribute and be part of something, it'll feel really uncomfortable, or it'll make us feel a bit nervous, or we don't want to say the wrong thing. The impostor syndrome will be running strong, we actually need to have a plan of attack to push us through that we got there because somebody believes in us, even if we don't believe in ourselves at that time. So we're there because somebody believes in us, we need to be able to push through and actually get something done or said or contributing that first meeting.

Helga Svendsen 26:03

Oh, I love it. Love it. Oh, Julia has so much fabulous tips in here already? What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had?

Julia Spicer 26:14

So I would love for people if they are invited to attend or be part of something to take that opportunity up? Get the information, do your homework, for sure. But do it people don't ask people for the sake of it. I think we are past having warm bodies on boards and committees. Yeah, we want people who are doers, so if you've been invited to something, you know, credit to you, that's fantastic. Get involved and turn up and show up. And you're there because somebody has seen something new whether you've seen it yourself or not, as I said earlier, so take the invitation and say yes, would be one of my take outs for for people. And the other thing is, I genuinely believe people want to help. I genuinely believe that people want to support others, so if you are listening to these podcasts, and you want to join a board or you want to be part of something, and you've got somebody in your network who is doing what you would love to do, tell them we aren't mind reader's, we can't help people into a room, if we don't know that's the room you want to go into. Or we can't get you an invitation to something or other if we don't know that that's your passion. So if you've got people in your network who are connected and doing the things that you want to do, you just need to tell them that you'd love an opportunity to do the same thing so that they can then put your name forward at a future event or activity or whatever it might be. So that would be my to take aways, say yes. And actually ask for what you want.

Helga Svendsen 27:40

Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Julia Spicer 27:43

Helga I reckon anything that Brene Brown does is brilliant from a leadership perspective. And I think particularly, I'm going to be a bit gendered here. I think, particularly for those of us who are women looking at leadership roles, I think she's been really helpful for me in terms of being an authentic female leader. I do think that's great. And then from a governance perspective, obviously, you know, any of the company directors work that happens. But the book that I really enjoyed and found useful was A Fish Rots from the Head, this piece around how we at a board level really influence more than we sometimes think we might.

Helga Svendsen 28:23

Thank you so much, Julia. You're talking about generosity before and your generosity and so thank you for your generosity in taking the time to share some of your wisdom with the take on board community today. I know people will take a lot from it. So thank you so much for taking the time.

Julia Spicer 28:38

Thanks for all your work.

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