

Take on Board

Transcript – Alissa Hsu-Lynch



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Alissa Hsu-Lynch about her journey to corporate board service, how she landed her first public board seat and what it's been like to serve as a first time director. First, let me tell you about Alissa. Alissa is a health technology executive who leads global med tech strategy for Google Cloud, following a successful career at Johnson and Johnson. She's a board director at Pulmonx Inc, I hope I said that right. A governing trustee of American Ballet Theatre, and a Henry crown fellow of the Aspen Institute. In her prior life, she was a professional modern dancer, I love it when we have these interesting skills that we bring to the boardroom. There's lots of dancing in the boardroom. So I imagine that's quite helpful. So welcome to the take on board podcast. Alissa,

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 0:50

Thank you so much for having me.

Helga Svendsen 0:52

It is fabulous to have you here. And whilst I'd love to talk about dancing in the boardroom, before we get there, before we talk about your journey to corporate board service, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. So can you tell me a story about young Elisa that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 1:10

Actually, I'm going to bring up dance because I danced my whole childhood. Really, my childhood dream was to become a ballet dancer. And I never would have thought that I would have gone from having my dream be a ballet dancer to actually dancing professionally. So I danced professionally, not in ballet was a little bit too short to be a ballerina. But I ended up having a professional modern dance career after college, dance for six years travelled all over the world. But never would have thought that I'd go from being a dancer to ending up where I am now today, which is working in health technology at Google Cloud, and also serving on a public board of directors as well as on a nonprofit board of directors. So you never know where life is gonna take you. And I would love to talk about a little bit later. Some of the lessons that I've learned in dance that I do think benefit me now today in business as well as in the boardroom.

Helga Svendsen 2:10

That would be fantastic. I always pick up my years when we talk about dance, I was absolutely not a professional dancer. But I did used to teach dancing, teach partner dancing. So I always pick up my ears when we talk about dancing. And I know we've had other take on board guests, as well. So it's interesting, in fact, so one of your boards, you've talked about being on a not for profit board. But of course, it's the American Ballet Theatre. So I'm guessing it's partly where you get to bring those beautiful passions together around governance and around dance.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 2:38

Yes. And actually, the first board that I got on was a nonprofit board. It wasn't American Ballet Theatre, but it was it was also an arts organisation called Dance NYC. That was in New York City, I was living in New York City at the time, and I was starting to think about board service. And I was advised that maybe getting on a nonprofit board could be a good stepping stone to eventually joining a corporate board. And in the nonprofit world, you're really volunteering your time. So I wanted to find an organisation that I personally was passionate about. And that's what got me involved with dance NYC. And then now, I'm also serving on the board of directors of American Ballet Theatre, which does bring me back to my roots and belay. And it's been really rewarding to serve on that board because I joined in the middle of the pandemic, really at the start of the pandemic. And if you think about the performing arts, they all had to stop performing live. And that was really the source of revenue for American Ballet Theatre and all their touring stopped all their in person stage performances. And I have a marketing background. So joining them, I felt like oh, I can help them think about how do they go digital? How do they pivot their strategy to to reach a different audience that maybe they didn't have the opportunity to reach before? And so it's been a lot of fun to just get involved in dance from a business perspective.

Helga Svendsen 4:05

Yeah, it's so interesting. I will definitely get onto your journey to the corporate boardroom at some soon. But it's I think it's been interesting. The pandemic has, I mean, obviously, pandemics aren't great. And it would be better if we'd never had to experience it. But it has also prompted positive change sometimes in organisations and business models and accessibility for people into whatever the the product or service might be for organisations. So I think it's been an interesting kind of prompt in that way. So I would love to hear how you landed your first public board seat. So maybe you can talk us through that journey.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 4:42

I had been working at Johnson and Johnson I had a long career at Johnson and Johnson, both on their consumer businesses and then moved into their medical device businesses. So like a 20 year career, worked all over the world started in the US but then also had international assignments in

Shanghai, China. And then most recently in Switzerland working in the Europe, Middle East Africa region. And following the end of that assignment, my husband and I had become empty nesters and wanted to move back to the US. And we decided not to move back to New Jersey, which was the state where we were living before we had moved to Switzerland, but instead had fallen in love with the mountains in Switzerland, and just being able to travel around Europe. And so in moving back, we looked around the US and said, Well, where else has mountains and an international airport. And we landed on Seattle as being a place where we felt like we could build a life. And I'd let j&j know, look, I'm open to staying with the company. I'd love to stay with the company. But I'm moving to Seattle. And unfortunately, j&j did not have a major office in Seattle. And this was all pre pandemic, before everybody was able to work from wherever they wanted to work. And so I decided to leave and move to Seattle and started thinking about what would my next chapter be. And I got exposed to this idea of serving on boards and maybe developing a portfolio of work, serving on nonprofit boards, for profit boards, maybe doing some consulting, I felt like I just didn't know that much about boards. But it seemed like a good path, there was an increasing focus on getting more women, women of color on boards. And so I really just started networking and talking to people and trying to learn, I didn't even know like, okay, private equity board, venture capital board, corporate board, like what is the difference? You know, when I started my board journey, I actually did not really understand what the difference might be. And what the role of a corporate board director, what do you do? So I met with a people in private equity, NBC, who served on corporate boards really tried to expand my network. I also signed up during the pandemic to do a lot of these online workshops. There are some really great ones in the US, for example, the 5050 women on boards, they have a board workshop called Get on Board. And it just gives you a great background on what does it mean to be a corporate board director, they focus a little bit more on the public boards, what do the different committees do? How do you develop a board bio, what's your elevator pitch. Um, so it was really, really helpful. I just educated myself. And that got me down the path of believing that I would like to serve on a corporate board, and also just expanding my network. So I'll come back to that later. But it's still very much network driven, getting yourself in that consideration set. So that really was the start. And I would say it was maybe a year, year and a half from when I first started thinking about getting on boards, to when I actually got a public board opportunity. And that came through through my network through a recruiting firm that I had met, they just came to me with a great opportunity that leverage my medical device experience. So Pulmonx is a medical device company, went through that whole interview process and was selected. And I've now I've been serving on that board since July of last year. So it's been, you know, nine months or so I've attended two virtual, they've only been virtual but two board meetings and I serve on the audit committee. So they do have a fair number of committee meetings in between the formal board thinks

Helga Svendsen 8:37

There is already so much there, but I want to know about so I'm interested there you talked about how I initially didn't know there was these different types of boards and then you started investigating and you know, there's the public boards and private equity and all of the different types of boards but also different dangers, I guess of business for those different boards. How did you choose? Or did you choose? Was it opportunistic? Or did you say you know what, here's the

type of board I want to be on in terms of legal standing or stage of development. How did you choose where you want it to fit

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 9:09

in? Yeah, that's a great question. I think for the first public board seat, you know, you often hear it's really hard to get the first one I definitely wanted to get my first public board seat so I definitely had my eye on that. But I also interviewed for private equity backboard, I have learned that even just through that interview process, that it is often a little bit more hands on you're really there to serve as an adviser to the CEO especially if you're one of the few independent or directors on a private equity backboard because the other board members may be the from the private equity company or investors that that one I recognize I would need to be a little more hands on have more time to be able to almost be operational with that board versus a public board where it's A little bit more focused on governance and risk management. And often, the expectation is that you're not getting too operational, you're trusting the management team to do their jobs. But with a private equity board, there is almost the expectation of roll up your sleeves and help us out. And at the time, I actually did get an offer for a private equity backboard, I also got an offer for a full time job from Google. So I had left j&j. And this great full time opportunity came through with Google. So I ended up turning down the private equity board just because I was starting a new job. And I felt like I needed to focus on that I would have a huge learning curve joining Google. So I turned down that opportunity. And then about six months later, sort of raised my head up and said, Oh, I think maybe I have capacity. Now. Let me reach out again. And that's when this public board opportunity came through. But definitely, when I was thinking about having a portfolio of work, before I took the full time job, I guess I do still have a portfolio of work. I was interested in joining different types of boards just because I thought that would be really interesting to have different perspectives and be involved in companies at different stages.

Helga Svendsen 11:12

I love it when people join boards. But I also love it when I hear people say they said no, for whatever reason, it might be because it just shows people have really thought through what it is they might be getting into. And of course, that's part of it your own personal due diligence, as well as the due diligence around the organisation. And I guess what I'm hearing there is your own personal due diligence was actually this is not right for me at this time, which is fabulous to hear. Because sometimes people just think just jump at any opportunity you get

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 11:39

If I can just build on that. I think it's not just that it wasn't the right time for me. But I felt like it wouldn't be fair to the organisation, because I wouldn't have the time to devote to them. And I think you also have to think about what it is, you know, they are paying you to bring to the table. And I just felt like it would not be fair to them. If I joined while taking on a new job.

Helga Svendsen 12:02

From my perspective, even if they're not paying you even if it's a volunteer role, you have your responsibilities. So having the time to make the commitment for not just the legal obligations for the role, but also the kind of personal responsibility. So yeah, it's it's great to hear. So what I'm hearing in a way there is you developing that picture of what you wanted. And then presumably, you're developing, and this might have come from other 5050 women on board, great organisation. I've interviewed some of the women from that organisation as well, and they do fabulous work. Presumably part of that was you developing your value proposition for what you can give to a board. And at the same time looking at what sort of board you want to join, because there's got to be a match your value proposition and their value proposition and making that match? How did you approach developing your own value proposition?

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 12:51

Yes, that is so critical. And it is really hard because we're so close to ourselves and who we think we are. And also I think if you are coming from being used to working full time role, board service is different than a full time job. And I first I had to learn that and get out of the mindset of okay, I had this title and I did these jobs, like the typical resume for a job, a board bio and a board resume is different. It's more focused on what are the capabilities that you bring? What are the strengths as well as your experience, so your experience definitely is relevant. But they're not hiring you again, to run the company. They're hiring you for strategic guidance for risk management, for helping them think through situations that they may not have faced previously. And so for me, I had to think about what are the skill sets that I bring that may match up with what boards are looking for, you know, in joining Google, that actually helped strengthen my value proposition because I had a strong healthcare background. So I was bringing healthcare and consumer goods, industry expertise. But then moving into health technology with a big tech company, also enabled me to talk about digital transformation, because that's what I do every day now is work with companies to help drive their digital transformation. And that is a very hot topic for boards right now is, is driving digital transformation. So I was able to sort of hone in on that. Also think about my years of working in consumer marketing, and also working globally. So I really positioned myself to be talking about I mean, I can give you my elevator pitch.

Helga Svendsen 14:38

Oh, actually, could you that would be fantastic. I think that would be really useful for people to hear if you could,

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 14:44

Sure, sure. I haven't practiced it. So let's see how it goes. That's yeah, so I have over 20 years of global experience in consumer goods and the med tech industry and have managed multibillion dollar business CES at Johnson and Johnson and other companies, and have worked abroad. So I've worked in the US in China, as well as in the Europe, Middle East Africa region. And I really bring the ability to help companies solve big challenges with strategic thinking and structure. Typically, they say if you do serve on boards, you can add the boards that you serve on.

Helga Svendsen 15:27

I love that. And what I love about it is it is short and sweet and really clear. Like I didn't, sometimes when I'm doing this with my groups, I literally time the minutes, like 60 seconds, absolute maximum, but yours then was about 10 seconds, I reckon, but tells us exactly like it's perfect. Here's my experience, here's what I bring to the boardroom. And then it allows them to dig into those parts that people want to know more about. Oh, love it. Thank you. Thanks for sharing that. That's totally put me off what I was going to ask next, though, it was so fabulous. So you develop your value proposition I heard in there as well. You talked about networks, key part of positioning yourself, can you tell us a little more about how that actually happened? Was it a post on LinkedIn? Hello, I'd like to join a board or were you approaching former colleagues and say, I just like to have a chat about being on a board. In practical terms. How did you do that?

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 16:22

I think for a lot of people, they don't like networking. And I would put myself in that bucket previously. And I had been with Johnson and Johnson for so long, that I realized towards the end of my career there that most of my network was internally at that company. And as I was thinking about my next chapter, whether it be full time work or board work, I just realized I needed to expand my external network. So I reached out to some people who had left j&j previously. And, you know, it's just one person at a time. So they introduced me to one person through that conversation, they would say, oh, you should talk to so and so. And so I just followed up on every single conversation, and got much more comfortable with speaking with people when you're not there to ask for anything. So I wasn't speaking with them to say, Oh, can you get me on board? I was really speaking with them to learn about their experience, if they served on a board, what they liked about it, what was their journey? So just have a conversation with people and ask, Oh, is there anybody else that you think would be useful for me to speak with, and that really started me off on networking. But I think the important thing is that a lot of boards are still finding potential directors through their networks. So they go to their other directors that are already on the board and say, Who do you know, or they will reach out to some recruiting firms and do searches. So you really need to get yourself in the consideration set. And I'll mention one other organisation that I found was very helpful. It's a nonprofit called him for her. And it was founded recently, maybe two, three years ago. And the whole concept of that pre pandemic was, they recognize that getting board roles comes through networking. And so they would host these salon style dinners, where they would

have maybe a CEO of a company who is often interacting with the board, and existing corporate directors, and then they'd invite board ready women, and have an intimate dinner, maybe 20. People have some table conversation around boards and your experience. And it just facilitated getting to know people in a very relaxed, smaller atmosphere. And then if you made a connection with somebody, you could follow up with them. And I wouldn't say the board opportunity I got came through that. But just putting yourself out there, I think, take any opportunity that comes your way. And another piece of good advice that I got was when you're ready, let people know that you're interested in finding a board. So I you know, this is something I'm interested in and that way, people may think of you when they hear of an opportunity. So it's not necessarily like asking them to get you on a board. It's just this is something I'm interested in here my qualifications, if something comes your way that you consider me, you know, appreciate it. So, yeah,

Helga Svendsen 19:33

I confess I don't love the word networking, but the activity of networking, like it's just meeting interesting people. It's just an excuse to meet interesting people. In some ways. I consider this conversation networking. Somebody reached out and said, Do you want to interview Elisa? I'm like, Yeah, I do. Why not? And we get to have this really interesting chat. I love it. It's just building connections and learning stories of people. So I love that and what I loved Net when you talked about your networking was, it's about learning about people, and maybe about yourself and about whatever it is that you're talking about. It's not about the ask. So it's not Hi, can you get me on a board role, it's like, tell me more and learning I love it.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 20:14

And how they also mentioned one other organisation pioneering Collective is another organisation that I was introduced to, that was super helpful for me and introducing me to people to learn about the different roles, or the different types of companies for boards. And also, as I was thinking about potential role, so they can help you with your resume with your social media presence, which is another thing I wanted to mention. Because marketing yourself is also important. Because if you are already in the consideration set in, your name comes up. What are they going to do? They're going to Google you. So what does your Google profile pop up? And particularly, you know, I think in the business world, LinkedIn is very important. Pioneering and collective is one organisation that I found helpful just in thinking about, how are you showing up? And maybe, you know, rather than just self published blog posts, which is where I was, in the beginning on LinkedIn? How do you get some sort of external articles about you, or if you want to position yourself as a digital transformation expert, maybe you should be posting more about that and sharing articles about that. So it's just a good thing to be aware of is your social presence

Helga Svendsen 21:32

And relating it to your value proposition? In a way, what is the experience and the skills I am seeking to showcase as part of my value proposition is my social media, the public face of me reflecting that great advice, and I'll make sure we put links to those organisations. So you've talked about him for her 5050 women on boards in the pioneer and collective I'll make sure we put links to all of those in the show notes, so people can easily get them it was through pioneering collective that this conversation is happening. So they are doing fabulous work in what's the word showcasing? I guess, the women that they have and saying, let's get their voice out there on things like this podcast. So shout out to the fabulous people at pioneering collective for doing that. You talked earlier about lessons from dance for the boardroom. And I don't want to finish without returning to that. So maybe you can talk us through what are the lessons from dance for the boardroom?

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 22:27

I'll start by saying that I had a successful dance career. And then I went back to business school and made a transition into business. My first job out of business schools was with j&j, I really downplayed the fact that I had been a dancer. So I sort of compartmentalize that and said, that was my prior life. Now I'm a businesswoman. And I did that because I felt letting people know that I had been a dancer, maybe they would not give me credibility and believe that I should be there as a businesswoman. And so I just didn't talk about it. And I think it was couple years later as you get 360 feedback, and I got some feedback that people don't feel like they really know you. And you know, it got me thinking well, hmm, am I not actually bringing my full self to work and, you know, maybe I should just be more myself and, and it made me realize that being a dancer actually set me apart, it differentiated me and it was uniquely me. And as I embrace that more made me recognize, I'm actually applying a lot of the things that I learned in dance, and they're making me successful at work. So things like, of course, discipline, and working hard, but also creativity and, you know, being very passionate about an idea or whatever you're working on. And also just being able to perform under pressure, being on stage and being comfortable or being able to calm your nerves, whether you're presenting to senior management or large sales organisation, or doing immediate interview, you know, it prepared me well for high pressure situations, which sometimes you face in the business world. And so those are some examples of lessons I've learned in dance that I think also apply in the boardroom.

Helga Svendsen 24:19

Oh, I love it. I'm so glad I asked that. You know, I'm guessing every time you mentioned that you're a former professional dancer. That's when people really tell me more. It's an interesting thing. And people love to know interesting things about people. Gosh, we've covered off a lot on your journey and about dancing. So I'm wondering what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 24:42

The first is really know your value proposition for a board. So think about that carefully. And it can evolve over time as well. But try to get that elevator pitch so you're comfortable saying it because you never know in what situation you might have the opportunity to bring it forward,

Helga Svendsen 24:58

Like in the middle of a podcast Just when somebody says Give us your value proposition is great.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 25:03

The second one is around networking and think about networking as positioning yourself to be in the consideration set. Because if you're not in the consideration set, you might miss out on an opportunity, but do it in a way that's comfortable for you. And like you said, it's about having a conversation and learning about people. So that would be the second thing. And the third thing, maybe we didn't quite talk about it, but I wanted to share is have confidence in yourself. And at the same time, though, remain humble. And that's probably comes from my background with Chinese immigrant parents and growing up in the United States, with my parents, and just always working hard and being humble. And just one example of that is, I had to learn to be confident that I belonged in the boardroom. So joining them are first public board, you know, a little nervous in the beginning, but you have to remind yourself that no, you bring the skills, you bring capabilities that they're interested in, Otherwise, they wouldn't have invited you to join the board. But at the same time, don't get overconfident or cocky and remain humble. So after my first board meeting, I reached out to the CEO to the chair of the board and said, you know, this was my first board meeting, I'd love to just get some feedback, because I want to continue to develop as a board director, and I tend to do that now after every meeting, I'll reach out to one or two of the other directors and just say, you know, do you have any feedback for me? Or, you know, is there anything that I could be doing more of or thinking about more? Are there other ways that you think I could be helping the company? And I think that humility and continual learning is really important?

Helga Svendsen 26:48

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

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 26:52

Well, I think tied into some of our themes around hard work and passion. I wanted to recommend the book Grit by Angela Duckworth. So she talks about passion and perseverance and how that is turning out through her research to be the biggest indicator of long term success. And I truly think

that that works for me as well. And if you don't have time to read the book, she also did a TED talk, that really worth watching as well. Oh, fantastic.

Helga Svendsen 27:25

Well, again, we'll put links to both of those in the show notes as well both to the book itself, and also to the TED talk, if people want to do the Express version. We have a take on board book club. And I think we've got books to last us for the next 10 years. But we'll add add grit to that book club list as well. Thank you so much. It's been fabulous to talk about your journey to the boardroom lessons from the dance floor, knowing your value proposition and all of the other fantastic pointers that you've given the take on board community. So again, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the take on board community today.

Alissa Hsu-Lynch 28:00

Thank you so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.