

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 193

Transcript – Christina Matthews applies lessons from a competitive cricket career to board strategy.



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Christina Matthews about culture and strategy. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this conversation today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and paying respects to elder's past and present and acknowledging their continuing connection to land to waters and to culture, and also acknowledging that this land was never ceded. 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 Christina. Christina is on the boards of Youth Focus and Leadership WA. She has formally been on the board of the Bradman Foundation. Christina is the Chief Executive Officer of West Australian Cricket and a former Australian cricketer. She is a well respected voice within the Australian cricket community and has proven herself to be an effective and courageous leader since taking on the role of CEO at WA cricket in 2012. And she has redefined the way WA cricket approaches its business. Christina brings with her 35 years of experience in various management coaching and development roles within sporting organisations, including cricket, hockey, and Australian rules football, a significant contributor to the development of cricket. She has spent many years supporting community cricket associations and sits on a number of boards and committees. In 2022, Christina was named to WA sports administrator of the year and is one of the 500 most influential people in WA. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Christina.

Christina Matthews 1:36

Thank you very much.

Helga Svendsen 1:38

It is so fabulous to have you here. And I definitely want to talk about culture and strategy. But before we do that, if we could just dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Christina that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Christina Matthews 1:54

It's interesting, you look back on your life, and you think about moments that you remember. And I remember as a kid primary school kid, for some reason I was desperate to have a diary in a briefcase, I thought it was just fantastic if you had to have a diary, because you had so many appointments you had to make. And briefcase was a symbol of being a very important person and someone who was in charge of things. So I didn't have anything that went with it about what I wanted to be it was just like, they were symbols of someone who kind of had success and was important. It's quite funny because I started playing cricket formally when I was 12 in a club. And by 14, I was on the committee. So from the age of 14 to now, I've always been on committees, councils, boards, so forth, as the language has changed over time, which all have their own set of rules and governing processes. But of course now you know more centred on being on boards.

Helga Svendsen 2:56

Yeah, interesting. I'm wondering, do you have a briefcase now?

Christina Matthews 3:01

No, no, I did. I did get a briefcase at one stage. But it was a bit daggy so yeah, I just like go for a standard bag.

Helga Svendsen 3:12

And I'm guessing you don't have a diary, because everything's online now as well.

Christina Matthews 3:15

That is right, it did take me a long time to get rid of my paper diary, just clinging on to it. But I very much and technically focused in regards to my appointments.

Helga Svendsen 3:27

Which also means of course, that the briefcase doesn't have so much to have in it these days. So Oh, I love that story. And, and it's so interesting to hear that you've been on boards by whatever name they go, since quite a young age as well. So, so tell me as a 14 year old cricketer. I mean, it's all well and good playing cricket. But what then attracted you to being on that? Or was it the briefcase? What attracted you to being on that side?

Christina Matthews 3:55

Yeah, it's, you know, I've often thought about that. And I think it's because I always have wanted to know how things worked and how I could help things to work. I very much all my life have thought I don't have any right to complain about anything if I'm not willing to get involved in making it better. So I think it was probably driven from there and trying to make things better, for my own reasons as a player and a club owner and a more efficient environment that I was playing in. But I think it's purely about somewhere in me, there must be a drive to help the broader communities with which I'm involved.

Helga Svendsen 4:36

Do you think, you know often that comes from parents or family influence? Was there something in there that might have impacted that? I really need to get in and make things better?

Christina Matthews 4:46

I can't remember anything specifically, but I do know my dad. He was president of his Soccer Club on the committee fundraising so forth and he when I started playing cricket, he immediately went on to the club committee to about. So I think there is something genetic in that my brother is the same. He's always been on his cricket club committee. So there's something in that isn't nature or nurture. But you know, evidence of both.

Helga Svendsen 5:13

Yeah, fantastic. Okay. Well, then let's turn to our topic today, which is around culture and strategy. You've been on a huge amount of boards. And I'm guessing you've seen all sorts of different cultures in the boardroom, some good, some bad, and everything in between would be my guess, and possibly different approaches to strategy as well. So where should we start this conversation?

Christina Matthews 5:39

I think you always have to start with culture. And people will often say, it takes a long time to turn a culture around from what is perceived as a bad culture to a good culture. I think it's turned around the moment you start modelling the culture you want, it is not something that is done overnight and finished, it is an everyday thing. But the moment you start sending those messages out, the culture begins to change. And there's various indications of that, depending on where you are, I probably learned that most of all, as a player in a team, successful teams happen when people all understand where you need to go, what their role in that team is, and what sort of behaviours and values you

need for that team to be successful. To be honest, all I've done is simply transferred that to a work environment.

Helga Svendsen 6:33

Interestingly, right, you know, having that vision or purpose, you know, being clear on who's doing what, and making sure the behaviours backup the values. So is there a story you might like to share with us around a boardroom, maybe where that worked really well, or even where it it turned around, you know, where there was some of that behaviour role modeled, to be really aligned to purpose, knowing the roles and behaviours aligning to values.

Christina Matthews 7:01

I think probably when I learned the strength of that, when I was still playing cricket, as I said, I was on my own club committee, I then got a position on what at the time was called the Sydney Women's Cricket Association, which was the over arching body for female cricket in in New South Wales, and eventually became chair of that party. Now, obviously, most of the people as often happens in women's sports, the people who are playing or administering it, as well. So your historic involvement with those people is on the field. And with that, you have your various competitiveness, rivalries, so forth. And then you're around a table with them trying to kind of determine how do we take this competition forward. So releasing the personality I had on the field, into the personality that needed to be the collaborator with others, to drive an outcome that was good for everybody's team, was really where I learned the power of that, because any competitive on field environment, there are great rivalries, and dare I say, love hate relationships. And, you know, people that you think, are never going to sit down for a drink with that person. They're just evil because they have an unfilled personality. But when you're trying to grow something and make change, you have to get a bit more depth into the people you're dealing with. And you have to let them know that you're an approachable person. And so on the field, I was very competitive. I wasn't what people might call nowadays, a sledgehammer. But I knew what we had to do to win and how to manage that. And all the mental parts that go with that. So people who didn't know me had a certain view of me, people who knew me knew I was very light hearted, easy going, funny, whatever. So it was important that the people who I'd always competed against, understood the other side of me in working with me to drive change in a different area.

Helga Svendsen 9:14

Oh, that is so interesting that on field personality versus off field collaborator that is required. So were you involved in or were you chair of the Sydney Women's Cricket Association at the same time as you were playing? Yes. So I'm interested, then I love hearing that, you know, you're like, oh, okay, I need to have a different persona here. You know, what I do out of the field is not going to work in the boardroom and particularly as chair, how did you actually do that? Because if you've, if you've

been a cricketer on the ground and the hard nut as you say it and then you're the collaborator, the bringer of people together, how did you actually make that transition?

Christina Matthews 9:50

Well, I think the off-field persona is what I really am. You learn in a competitive environment, the facade you have to whereas an athlete, so you know, you can't be the fun jokey collaborator with everybody on a field that you're competing against. So you have to develop a persona that keeps you in the right mental space to excel. So it was allowing my authentic self to come through, I think is probably the best way to describe it, and not hold on to things that happen on the field.

Helga Svendsen 10:26

And then I'm interested the other way around, then when people got to see what you were really like your authentic genuine self, that collaborative self, that worker with other people, not the hard knots did that impact on the field as well, where they're like, Ah, don't worry, Christina, she's, you know, the barks worse than the bite almost?

Christina Matthews 10:43

No, it doesn't change the call competitiveness. What changes is they know, that has its place, and it's not so off the field, you have a much better relationship.

Helga Svendsen 10:55

I'm wondering in as much detail as you're able to share. I'm guessing there were some people that didn't get that distinction between on field type behaviour and culture versus boardroom type, behaviour and culture.

Christina Matthews 11:12

Yeah, they would be, but I'm not sure that bothered me. Unless it was stopping the off field stuff involving, and most people didn't get it I didn't I wasn't involved with in a broader sense. And it really didn't impact me. I mean, I don't spend a lot of time worrying about whether people like me or don't like B, I spend a lot of time thinking on about the people I need to work together, how do we work together effectively, that's probably how I dealt with them.

Helga Svendsen 11:42

And whether it's that experience or others, is there a particular experience that you can share from the boardroom that really kind of epitomized that culture.

Christina Matthews 11:51

Look I think in that environment where I had on field and off field tension, if you like, because on that committee, there was people from all levels of cricket. So people who were playing in at that time, we had a fourth grade, third grade, second grade in first grade. So people who played fourth grade, were often intimidated by the people who played first grade, I was an Australian player as well. So making those people who played fourth grade feel comfortable in environment, that their contribution to the committee was not equivalent to their ability on the cricket field, it was valuable to know that people sometimes develop misconceptions, or they put people on a pedestal, that, you know, they could never be someone I could talk to, and whatever. So it's breaking that down and, and creating, you know, we're all equal in this room, the fact that I'm a better cricket than than you by the nature of the grades we playing, doesn't matter. Because you know, what works, where you play, and I know what works, where I play, and we need to bring them together.

Helga Svendsen 12:57

That is such a yeah, lovely, lovely way of bringing it all together and having that true collegiate outcome in what is otherwise a competitive environment.

Christina Matthews 13:06

Now, keep an also in mind that, that doesn't mean that everybody that you sit on a board with or or committee with, is someone that buys into that, or that is on, you know, accepting the vision that the majority have spoken about. So there's also an issue around, how do you deal with that, and without belittling that person in the environment, or so forth, at the same time, not allowing them to distract everybody from what the court is?

Helga Svendsen 13:35

I'm wondering whether it's in your position as chair of either that board or other boards, is there a story you can share around that maybe where that boardroom dynamic wasn't overall as collegial as it could have been? And how you might have managed that?

Christina Matthews 13:49

I think sometimes there's a process you go through. So you know, in your early days, as chair, you're trying to work out what makes people tick, and those people but less collegial, you put some time

and effort in to get to understand why are they not coming from the journey. Now, you may be able to turn that around, you may not. And it may be that you have to go, Okay, I just need to manage this person within the room. Because one of the really damaging things on any board or committee is that one person stops that entity from being productive. And that often happens by allowing them to have too much time to talk. You know, one of the tips I got later in life was to, you know, if there is someone who has a negative influence on the group, make sure you don't go to them first. So they don't put an influence on the group but go to them last when they've heard other people's opinion, and maybe that's diluted, what they might have done at the start. So it all depends on the personality you're dealing with. Sometimes I'm really patient with that. Sometimes I'm not well. What I've tried to do over my time in any environment is to, to make sure that governance is well enough understood, that randomness can't take hold. Like we don't have strong frameworks, you know, in boards, we're talking about the Constitution, the Governance Charter, the Policies, and so forth. It allows people to just bring randomness into the discussion. And you need to have those good guidelines, a good understanding of them. So you can explain to the person that's not within our charter won't do that. If you wish to go down that path, we'll have to re-examine our strategy, of course, and so forth.

Helga Svendsen 15:39

It's such a good idea to have, you know, those key documents, the I mean, the Constitution, or the Rules, or the charters or whatever they may be, and the strategy. And I when I was chairing one of the previous boards, I would literally carry the Constitution with me in my bag, a bit nerdy. Not in my briefcase that must be said, but in my bag regardless, because just handy every now and again to go, oh, hang on. Let's see what the rulebook says about this?

Christina Matthews 16:02

Yeah, yeah, that's right. Yeah. And I often now in my executive life, with our board, our committee, our subcommittees and so forth. I always have the charter within the Board Papers. And people find that all they go, why have we got this area? I said, because if there's a question, it's there to look at, rather than people speculating on what does our charter say?

Helga Svendsen 16:26

I love that idea. That's a great tip. So I know, one of your tips for people who are looking to be in the boardroom, or even building their board portfolio is to be really clear about what they can bring to the boardroom. Tell me more about why that's valuable for people.

Christina Matthews 16:41

We get asked or approach to go on a whole lot of different things, some things where you go, why would they ask me to be on that. And because you tend to go to what the subject matter of the organisation is to be your expertise. Whereas I've had the experience now where people have approached me on boards, because they've seen me demonstrate either through the media or through activities we do within our business, but I have a really strong understanding of governance, culture, strategy, so forth. So I actually spend less time worrying about what the core business is, and more time my contribution is around those areas. And it's particularly prevalent in sport and some other not-for-profits that, you know, we've often been environments that have had a lot of volunteers. Whereas nowadays, we have professional staff, you want to be really clear about staying where the strategy is not what the day to day staff are doing. So if you clear on your role in the board is it stops, you're getting involved in every discussion on the board, and you can then bring some expertise, or some suggestions that are more relevant to what your skill set is

Helga Svendsen 17:59

Absolutely. Spoken like a person who has governance in their key skill set, keep that line between governance and operational, as separate as you can, or, and again, I've been involved in organisations where the board was a bit more hands on, if that's the case, at least be aware when you're changing hats, at the very least.

Christina Matthews 18:19

Yeah, yeah, that's right board and the business of boards has changed drastically. But there are still some boards, who think that board members need to have portfolios. And that's not as relevant nowadays, as it used to be 30 or 40 years ago, where we didn't have the breadth of staff and the size of organisations we do now, particularly in the not for profit space. But it's really important that the staff don't feel that when a board member talks to him, they have to immediately jump and change whatever their operational plans were, because of board members talking to them, and has, you know, the perception is their head of their portfolio is marketing. So therefore, I have to do what they're saying.

Helga Svendsen 19:06

So you're now the CEO of an organisation, you're obviously in the boardroom of others, and you're obviously in the boardroom of this one as well, but as the CEO, rather than as a board member, per se. Can you talk me through, you know, the differences, I guess that you experience in that way as the CEO at the table rather than than as the board member of the table?

Christina Matthews 19:26

I think one of the things is that your CEO answerable to a board, it enables you to shape what you would be as a board member, and the sort of board director that you feel is helpful to the CEO, rather than not so you know, it's really good from that perspective. Like anything being a CEO is understanding the framework you're working in, but it does have its frustrations because, theoretically, you don't control anything that happens. In that boardroom, so you're relying on others, to set the framework and bring people on the journey, the CEO has a role in that as well. But, you know, sometimes and again, particularly not for profits, there's a tendency to get board members who may be a still learning where not for profit businesses are now and how things have changed.

Helga Svendsen 20:24

Yeah, having a CEO that's been in the boardroom, I think, you know, it's a no brainer that that helps the person in the CEO role and vice versa. Okay.

Christina Matthews 20:33

And one of the most challenging things, I think, for people coming onto boards, particularly or not for profits, and I'm talking that because that's my greater experience, is understanding that when you get on a board, or a committee or council, you're there to do the best for the whole business, not whatever particular representative group you may have grown up in being part of, and so forth, or else they'd be mayhem, probably contribute to the whole picture.

Helga Svendsen 21:04

Oh, Christina, I knew this would happen. The time goes way too quickly. So what are the key things you would like people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Christina Matthews 21:14

I think most importantly, it's to understand the governance framework within which this your particular board operates in how many layers there are, I think it's really important to understand and support the CEO, equally, be able to see through what the CEO might be presented. In an ideal world, you've got a good CEO, who is leading the board, but taking the board on the journey that they've decided they want to go on. And he's managing their staff very well, the opposite side, that is, you know, you're often coming into a board meeting once a month reading some papers, and not getting a real feel for what the culture of the organisation is. So how do you get that? And how do you kind of keep your ears and your eyes open, to look for inconsistencies in the things that are being presented at board level, and having conversations where you might pick up things that are an

indication of why things aren't working? I think most times on a board, you can get a gut feel of I don't think something's right here. Now, it might not be because the CEO is not doing their job. But you gotta go. Well, I need to figure out where that gut feelings coming from?

Helga Svendsen 22:30

And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Christina Matthews 22:34

I do always keep across the AICD magazines, and stories and governance Institute. So I looked for headlines that I think, oh, I need to have a look at that. And I've always been an observer and curious. So I tend to observe and then delve a bit deeper to find out what's going on. It's like anything, and people do degrees in different things. They do governance courses, and whatever. The certificate doesn't make you an expert. Your experience makes you the expert. So try and have a broad experience and really seek out feedback. The funniest thing about boards, I think, is we talk about board reviews and assessment of board members. The reality is, if you're on board for a long time, you become like a friend, and it becomes very hard to go, you know, you're a drain in the boardroom. How do we manage that? And how do we keep learning how to manage that and how to review the way your board operates, so that people genuinely can grow, not just be assessed as good or bad or indifferent.

Helga Svendsen 23:44

Oh, fabulous. Thank you, Christina. And in fact, before we close out, I must also thank Michelle Redfern who first put us in touch and then we caught up for a virtual copper and I knew that there would be an enormous amount that would be valuable for the podcast. So thank you so much for taking the time to share with me and to share with the Take on Board community today. I really appreciate it. Thank you very much.

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