

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 198

Transcript – Emma Olivier on Girl Guides leading to a career in assessing risk



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Emma Olivia about managing risk. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this podcast today. For me, that's the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture and 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 Emma. Emma is on the boards of Leadership Victoria, and she's on the audit and risk committee for Life Saving Victoria. Emma is the founder and CEO of Twenty Percent, a Disability Advisory organization working with corporate Australia. With over 30 years consulting experience and having been born without a left hand, she understands from her own lived experience, the challenges and opportunities of having a disability in corporate Australia. Emma has extensive corporate experience working across a number of industries, both in Australia and overseas. As a managing director at Accenture, she was the executive sponsor for disability inclusion in ANZ, Accenture for two years. Over this time, the employee reference group grew significantly and was a finalist in the Australian network of disability awards in 2021. Emma is an active member of her community at a local and state level. She is Victoria's first one armed Lifesaver and was appointed to Lifesaver Victoria's audit, finance and risk committee in 2019 in 2018, and have participated in the Williamson Community Leadership program run by leadership Victoria, and was appointed to their board in 2021. Emma was a nominee for Citizen of the Year in Bayside council for Australia de 2021, and has been a member of Bayside councils disability access and inclusion advisory committee since its inception. Welcome to the take on board podcast Emma.

Emma Olivier 2:06

Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 2:08

Fabulous to have you here and of course, another Leadership Victoria Williamson alumni and board member. So I am looking forward to this conversation in so many ways. But before we talk about managing risk, as always, I would love to delve just a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me about your upbringing, and what lessons you learned what you got up to and what the leading influences were on how you thought and what you did.

Emma Olivier 2:34

My upbringing was in suburban Melbourne, I grew up in the 70s and the 80s. So I'm definitely of the era where women were told we could have it all. And it wasn't till later, when I had my children in my 30 years that I realized that probably wasn't exactly true. Probably two influences growing up, I was involved in Girl Guides, and I really loved the teamwork, doing things outside my comfort zone. And those early experiences of leadership have always stayed with me. And I've always volunteered from a young age, I wanted to be a librarian growing up. And so I took myself down to have the library and asked if I could work there on a Saturday morning to have a bit of trial before you buy. And it was great experience. And I've continued to volunteer in my local community, I still live around the area that I grew up in, although I've travelled extensively, sort of between stints. And probably Lastly, I was the first person in my extended family to go to university. My parents believed in education definitely went to the best school they could afford, which was a Catholic girls, school and Bentley. So I was very proud to continue to go into university and I studied accounting at RMIT. And that's where I guess began my, my corporate career from that point.

Helga Svendsen 3:58

Interesting mixes in there. It's interesting. You mentioned the Girl Guides. I feel like I hear that quite a bit from guests on take on board that they started their leadership journey in some ways in the Girl Guides.

Emma Olivier 4:13

We had an amazing leader who still lives in the community. And just the things that she taught us as young girls, and I guess early adolescence always stayed with me. I have very fond experiences of that. And I would encourage other people that had young children or young women to look at that and also look at scouts. I think it's also an amazing organization as well.

Helga Svendsen 4:40

Did you ever think of joining the board of Girl Guides?

Emma Olivier 4:42

I have a rule that I'm only ever going to do to program a board. So maybe my future that my current boards and my current activities take up enough time so yeah, possibly, possibly. But it's one of those organizations that has to create a legacy and so important for us to think about The people that are behind us, and creating that future that we experience to create for them as well.

Helga Svendsen 5:07

Fantastic. I don't know if they still run it. But years ago, I was involved in a governance program with Girl Guides, where they got young women, kind of secondary school age women, and gave them an introduction to governance. It was fantastic. So I hope some of those women ended up on the Girl Guides board.

Emma Olivier 5:24

It's always been an organization that's been ahead of its time, I think things you got to experience and do and sadly, going through it in the late 70s, early 80s. That was my experience.

Helga Svendsen 5:38

Yes. Oh, oh, look, I could stay talking about that for the whole time. But I am very keen to delve into risk. It's one of those things that it's I mean, it's key to the boardroom is thinking about risk and thinking about risk appetite statement and managing risks and managing those strategic risks. So you're on the finance audit and risk committee might be in a different order, but the finance audit and risk committee for surf lifesaving, and you're on the board of leadership, Victoria, I imagine the risks that you're considering. And those two organizations are sometimes quite different. And I'm also guessing sometimes the same? Where should we start this conversation about risk?

Emma Olivier 6:20

It is such an interesting conversation. And I think it's something that it's such an important topic that boards need to get their heads around from a couple of different angles. First of all, thinking around the risks that the management team don't tell you about the risks that are over the horizon emerging risks, if we wind our minds back to 2019. I don't think anyone would have thought that we were going to have a global pandemic that would change the way we live and work significantly. For what, two and a half years. And certainly for those two organizations, it really challenged how we operated, how we existed, and how we continue to decide. So I think the takeaway is, what are the risks that are over the hill that we haven't seen yet? And what are the different things that the management team are telling you about? Typically, my experience management teams will have, they'll definitely have a point of view of risk. And I'll share that with the board, it's important to

make sure there is time on the board agenda, to talk around those different risks in detail. And to think about who the different risks owners are in the organization that should come to those meetings, and share their insight and experience. We've got to make sure that we hear different voices at the board table and different voices from the management team, not just from the CEO, or the CFO, and might be from the operations manager, it might be from the media person, or certainly lost them in Victoria, as well as leadership, Victoria both have reputational risks that need to be considered. What do we do that could lead up? We also the health scientist, or European was walking around the pub? What are the different things we have to think about from that point of view? It's interesting, we also have ordered a risk together in a committee. The challenge is how do you make the conversation not just about finances, but about the other risks, because I think our natural tendency is to typically talk about finances. And it's to make sure we talk about those other risks on a regular basis, because they can change and evolve.

Helga Svendsen 8:39

Regular listeners of the podcast will know I'm on the board of the Royal Women's Hospital. And for part of that time, I was on the audit committee, we have an audit committee, which is separate to our finance committee. So that helps a little bit. You know, I'm not an accountant. And one of the committee members used to say at the committee, so hello, what is the non beanie think as in what is the non bean counter? Think about this stuff. Shout out to people who are listening. If you're not the bean counter, don't think you shouldn't be on the audit committee or don't think you shouldn't be on the Finance Committee. Because my bet is, you will have insights the bean counters don't have and I mean, bean counters in the nicest possible way.

Emma Olivier 9:16

I'm gonna counter that's okay. You can say, that's a really important point. They're having those different voices around the table are going to ask different questions. If you have a group of engineers talking about safety, and they're only engineers, for example, you're gonna have a different conversation, whereas you put someone in, that's a non engineer, and I think it's exactly the same with Finance and Audit. Boards have to be also allowed to, someone has said, I'm gonna ask a dumb question. It's never a dumb question. Because if you're thinking that someone else is typically thinking that and I think as a board member, sometimes we think that the people with the qualifications in the area are the only ones called Find out the questions, it's really important to ask what you think is, even if it's an obvious question, because sometimes they're the things that can catch us out. Absolutely. I think my other point would be around cyber. And I've also been in a position where I've reported to a board on cyber. And I always used to say, we can't ever make the cyber risk go away, we can mitigate it. We have to plan for what happens when cyber hits us, because it's going to, and I think that some, some risk can't be disappeared, they can be managed, and they can be mitigated, but they can't just be eliminated. And cyber is one of those things that sometimes feels like a bit of the dark. But even simple things like multi factor authentication, what do you do with your Board Papers, when you read them, as I held in a secure location, particularly on nonprofits, we often use our personal Gmail accounts, think about if some of those items got

hacked, so even cyber from a board point of view is important. And often board members have generalized here, the laxest with cyber security. And that's just something to keep in mind.

Helga Svendsen 11:15

Here, I will say there was a board I heard of recently where the whole organization was abiding by the policy except for the board members. Because you're right, Gmail addresses or whatever it may be. Yes. So know them and abide by them, even if that means things are a bit more clunky for you as a board member.

Emma Olivier 11:34

Because culture comes from the top. And also you can expect the organizational processes, if the board doesn't follow the same processes. You mentioned, risk appetite. And I think that that is a really important conversation that has to be had annually between the board and the management team. Because that risk appetite really has to govern, every decision that the organization makes. It's not a piece of paper that we look at once a year, and it gets shoved in the drawer has to be a living, breathing document. And the most junior person in the organization has to be aware of the risk appetite. As doesn't say now, there's opportunity for improvement and a lot of organizations around risk appetite.

Helga Svendsen 12:18

So I'm wondering, in as much detail as you're able to share from the boards. And it's so interesting, because you're on the committee for a while. And so you're not actually going to the board, you're just inverted commas on the committee, you're on the board of another organization where obviously, are you on the finance audit and risk committee or however it is framed at leadership? Are you the chair of that committee?

Emma Olivier 12:38

No, I'm not, I'm not the chair.

Helga Svendsen 12:41

And then previously, you've reported to a board. So you've got a range of hats that have been or are available to you in different organizations. So I'm wondering some of these things about ensuring there is that robust relationship with the executive, ensuring that you're hearing from different voices, and not just from the CEO, ensuring things like the risk appetite statement are embedded, and not just a piece of paper that gets pulled out once a year? I'm wondering if there's any stories

you could share from your experience at surf, lifesaving Victoria or at leadership, Victoria, that really give us a flavor of some of these concepts?

Emma Olivier 13:21

Is going to be a hard one for me to answer testing what you're hearing what the CEO is telling you, or what you're reading with different members of the organization as best you can.

Helga Svendsen 13:33

Are you able to talk about at leadership, Victoria, the CEOs at the table, as well as these people? And that sort of thing? Is that possible?

Emma Olivier 13:41

Yes, I can. There's a couple of ways that we can get different voices, certainly at Leadership Victoria, we hear from three or four employees through various meetings. We also hear from alumni of the organization, as board members, we go to the events, and we speak to current participants. So there's multiple avenues that you can get the vibe of the organization and your hearing on Life Saving Victoria, you mentioned that I was on the audit and Risk Committee. I'm also a member of a lifesaving club. So I get to see the organization from different angles. And you know, these membership organization and community organizations are always quite complex in their makeup. That I think if you can see an organization from different angles, that gives you a more complete view that what you're saying, and obviously and I hope everyone's seen less inventories in the press quite a lot, especially at this time of year and that's the end of summer in Australia. That's also a good measure of what the media is saying about the organization aware and how to measure particularly some of those reputational risks that are floating around, but As members of the committee, we're also involved in the organization. And that's just something to think about. In bigger organizations, having been a member of staff, you might have a strategy day at a particular site. And you'll have events with staff. So you try to create that opportunity where you can interact with board members, that they're not seen as this lofty ideals, you actually can have access to them, and having a whistleblower policy as well. If there's a problem with the CEO, you want staff to be able to or the chair, for example, you want to have a mechanism that all people involved with the organization can report into. I think my other point around risk and risk committees is a more diverse, you can have that group, the better. And it's not just the normal elements of diversity, inclusion pillars that we think of, but it's diversity in thought. You want people that think differently, and you want to be able to create an environment that you can have constructive conversations that are robust. You never want everyone to agree. You know, you want to be respectful and kind with how you communicate that you want to hear from other voices. A board member that doesn't say anything, is a worry. And a sign of a good share will always be the person that says we'll go around the table and make sure each voice is heard. And I think as board members, we need to make sure that we never fall into groupthink

Helga Svendsen 16:31

Absolutely. In your experience, how is that managed in a practical way? Because all of the evidence is that diversity in group decision making makes for stronger decisions. Yet, they are often harder, because people are being tested on their views. And sometimes that means people need to even change some of their views and compromise around views rather than everybody walking in going. Yep, we all think the same. Awesome. We're all doing a fabulous job. So in practical terms, and if we're talking around risk, how do you ensure those conversations are really robust, and constructive and positive? What have you seen that works?

Emma Olivier 17:14

I think making sure we've got a code of conduct, I think the person sharing the conversation, it's the power of that tray, to make sure those voices are heard, to make sure not one voice is heard louder than the other voices. There are times when you have to vote on a decision. But also know that as a board, when you walk out, you are all agreed to that decision. And I think that's always important. I think it's also having courage. If there's something that you don't agree with, or you want more information on is to have courage to say, look, I'm not quite understanding this, can I have a bit more information, I often think that there's a pressure in the boardroom to sign off the paper agreed or a decision in the room. In my experience, unless you're the brain surgeon holding the scalpel, things will usually you can take time to make things you don't want to be unrealistic. You want to come in more prepared, you want to have read the Board Papers, there's always an opportunity to ask questions before the board meeting, if that's appropriate in the board that you're in. And also having the ego to say now that you've given me that extra piece of information. On now I understand it, and sometimes admitting that you your position may have changed. And that's okay, that's a mature way to look at things. This is not a competition of egos. But it's every few minutes. And there's always politics in humans. And I think it's you need to get to know your board members, we don't spend a lot of time together, it's typically two hour meeting, depending on the cycle could be every second month, my committee meets every month, in more recent times to spend virtual since COVID. So you get to know people less. And I think there is always a time to go out to actually meet in person and get to know each other on a more personal level. That's always the better way to get along with people. And to have that trusted, respected environment, that you can be authentic, in your opinion, and respected. And likewise, that's how you'll feel about others as well.

Helga Svendsen 19:20

You know, it's interesting, I'm thinking about the last couple of years in the pandemic times. You know, I heard in there it's important to hear from other voices. And sometimes that's through the kind of more social events almost, which is a very handy data gathering thing. Not that it's there to oh, I need to know what everybody thinks, but you just hear what is happening. And I'm hearing that those deeper relationships that often come from face to face interaction can sometimes really support that constructive decision making. So how have you found things over the last couple of

years when those things may not have been available? What impact have you seen from that maybe on risk and risk decision making?

Emma Olivier 19:59

I mean, obviously We've had during COVID, as with everyone else, we weren't especially living in Melbourne, there was muscle density, everything went virtual. There's that lot with that. I think the light is one of my committees meets at seven o'clock in the morning, seven to nine. And you know, if you're virtual, you can go on to your, your full day's work very easily. You don't have to travel in the car, you do have to make sure you're very present in a virtual conversation. It's so easy to get distracted. You can have your email open, you can have another team's chat going. So I think it's really important to be present. I found that yeah, the share of knowledge Victoria board. Yeah, we had a great dinner at the end of last year. And I think having a regular face to face gathering, and we did a board meeting and a dinner was a real, it's a really great way to cement those relationships. It's about balance, right? I don't think we always have to do things in person. But I think where it's possible, some face to face is good. The harder meetings with a hybrid meetings with some people were together, and some people were online, you need a very good chair, there is used to dealing in a hybrid situation to make sure all those voices are heard. Yeah. But the opportunities that when people travel, and they don't have to, you know, they can be more available, potentially spiritual. There's no perfect solutions. There's no silver bullet.

Helga Svendsen 21:25

It's interesting, isn't it? I agree. There is a dark and a light. Oh, am I Knew this wouldn't happen. The conversations always go way too quickly. But what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Emma Olivier 21:37

I think bringing different voices to the table is really important. Thinking around who's not there at the table that you need to hear from, thinking about what is not said, what is the risk that's not spoken about? And then how are those mitigations tested, we often talk about risks, we don't always talk about how those mitigations are tested to make sure they're robust. And depending on the industry that you're working in, that's really important. And probably the last point is all change tax a little bit here is that you mentioned in my introduction, that I am a woman with a disability, we are 20% of the community. So we're 20% of the employees of an organization of the customers that it deals with of the community that it seems seen. And I would challenge your listeners to think about how disabilities represented on the boards that they sit on, have discussed how they're considered. It can be very powerful. And it's something that it's from a diversity inclusion point of view, we're probably the least mature pillar in that.

Helga Svendsen 22:45

Interesting. Yeah, I think it's I think the statistic about 20%. I don't know what the statistic is for people with a disability in the boardroom. Pretty sure it's nowhere near 20%. And there's a lot of work to be done there. And that will lead to some of these stronger conversations that you've been talking about. You know, they go together.

Emma Olivier 23:05

They absolutely go together. So there's a lot to think about with diversity. But the more diverse you can make those groups that are having those conversations, the better outcome is going to come from that.

Helga Svendsen 23:16

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

Emma Olivier 23:20

There's one resource, there's a TED Talk by a woman called Stella Young, who was a disability advocate, who was sadly passed away. But if the listeners Google Stella Young TED talk, and she talks about not being someone's inspiration, Stella lived her life in a wheelchair, she's a comedian, she's very engaging to listen to. And I love the fact that she says just because I have a disability. I'm not your inspiration. And I think that that is something as we head into today's like International Women's Day later in the year, we have people with a disability day that we celebrate some of that. And I often hear my own experience where people say you're inspirational, and also for you in the same sentence. And I just want to be normal. And I think a lot of people with a disability. We don't want to be put up on that pedestal, that we're not here to inspire the rest of the community. And I think her message was very powerful. So encourage others to listen.

Helga Svendsen 24:20

Right? I will make sure we put a link to that in the show notes to make it easy for people to find as well as a link to your LinkedIn and to your website as well. Thank you, thank you so much for coming and sharing some of your wisdom, both around risk and about diversity and inclusion. With the take on board community. I really appreciate it. So thanks for being here.

Emma Olivier 24:42

It's a pleasure. Thank you very much.

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