

Take on Board

# Transcript – Gabrielle Dolan and storytelling for board members



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Gabrielle Dolan about storytelling for board members. First, let me tell you about Gabrielle. Gabrielle has previously been on the boards of IABC, which is the International Association of Business communicators for Asia Pacific. And she was also on the Victorian chapter of the International Women's Forum. Today, she's an international keynote speaker and author on storytelling and real communication. Her career highlight was meeting Barack Obama amazing. While delivering storytelling for the Obama Foundation, I might need to ask about that as well. Welcome to the take on board podcast, Gabrielle.

Gabrielle Dolan 0:39

Thanks Helga, it's great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:40

And I should also do just a little shout out to Monica. Monica, I'm about to mangle your surname. So apologies, Monica Lankooky.

Gabrielle Dolan 0:49

That sounds. That sounds close enough.

Helga Svendsen 0:52

Monica, thank you for making the suggestion of getting Gabrielle on the podcast. That was fantastic when we had a bit of a conversation in the Facebook group about this exact topic. So it's great to be able to explore it a little bit more here. So Gabrielle before we talk about storytelling, which I can't wait to do, but before we do that, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Gabrielle that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Gabrielle Dolan 1:19

Well, I am I grew up one of eight children, I was the sixth. So you know a lot of stuff happened in the house. So a lot of my friends say that I learned the skill of storytelling trying to get my parents attention with eight children. One story that I often share that I think highlights perhaps me and the support I had from my parents was when I was going from my very first job. So I actually failed English in year 12. I've published seven books. So I think my English teacher is the only one more surprised than me. But I didn't get into the course I had sort of plan to do so I actually went for this job as a trainee computer operator. Now this was in 1984. This was sort of when computers at first came out. And I actually had done computer science. It was like first introduced, I thought that sounds interesting. Not that I was an IT geek or anything or really into it. But I applied for this job as a trainee computer operator. And that was back in the day when you had to write the letter and I got an interview. And the following weekend, when jobs were just only advertised in the weekend paper on the job was advertised again. And I remember saying to Mum, I clearly didn't get the job. And she said clearly no one else got the job either. So why don't you reapply and write a different letter based on what you learned from the interview. And my initially it was like, Oh my God, that's a bit embarrassing. But I did. And I got the second interview. And pretty much the first question I asked me was, why did I apply again, and I just said, because I really want this job. And I know I'll be able to do it. And I was offered the job before I left the interview. And so I share that because I think it sums up a couple of things about me I did have parents that always just encouraged me to do stuff and also encouraged me if it doesn't work, like don't give up just do something different, like try a different thing. So I had that growing up. And I guess that's also just give things ago, like, I like sharing that story. Because you know, my mum's the hero in the story. But I think it sort of defines how I was raised.

Helga Svendsen 3:26

Like, you're right, that is a lovely story about your mother and about you. But what a what a beautiful gift for her to give you. And for that interview panel. Actually, I'm wondering what they did differently afterwards. You know, after having interviewed you the first time and for whatever reason not got the best out of you. That's partly you, but it's also partly them.

Gabrielle Dolan 3:46

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I was like I was 17 I so and it wasn't even a panel, then I think it was just the guy who was I was at the Australian wool testing authority. I learned more about wool of my three years there than I ever needed to know.

Helga Svendsen 4:02

Ah, that is a fabulous story. And in fact, you know, if I think about it in broad terms for our community, applying for board roles, folks, don't give up if you've applied once apply again. Get in

there and do it. In fact, one of my board roles I'd applied for three times before I finally got it. And I think I remember only half jokingly saying to them in the final interview. This is it, folks. Three strikes and you're out like I'm not three goes. That's a pretty good crack at it. I'm not going to do it again.

Gabrielle Dolan 4:31

Yes, I have some dignity still left.

Helga Svendsen 4:34

Exactly. Anyway, I did finally get it on that guy. And yeah, being six of eight, having to get the storytelling gene out there for our although hang on out of interest. What does the eighth of eighth do? Are they a storyteller too?

Gabrielle Dolan 4:50

They run a pub? He's a chef that runs a pub. And you know, there's a few stories there to the point is that everyone's a storyteller. We're all storytellers. Just some can do it better than others.

Helga Svendsen 5:01

Absolutely. We'll look at probably answers my next question, but there might be a slightly different angle on it. How did you get into storytelling?

Gabrielle Dolan 5:09

I left the Australian wool testing authority. After about three years, and I actually joined National Australia Bank, again, as a trainee computer operator, so I stayed in IT. And I worked at NAB for 17 years, I was at NAB and one of the cool things of working such a large organization, you not only change jobs, but you can change careers. And I went from it into learning and development roles into leadership development roles, and then into some pretty significant change management and project management roles. So as I change careers, I also, you know, work myself up into senior leadership position. So the last couple of years at NAB, I was leading people. So I was in a senior leadership role, but I was also rolling out significant change. And what I started to notice in those roles, is that when I shared a story, and it seemed to be like a personal story, it seemed to get the message across better, there seemed to be something in this, like people sort of understood it, and even remembered it. And I also noticed, you could like influence people's behavior with it and change their mind with a good story. So this was about 20 years ago. And what I started to notice is that the really, really good leaders were sharing stories and the brilliant presenters were sharing stories. And I read a book by Steve Denning, it's storytelling in organizations. And he was a senior

exec at the World Bank. And he had written a book about storytelling in organizations and part of the thought, if a senior executive, the World Bank has written a book on this, there's something in this, I'm pretty sure there's something in this. So I sort of just had this idea that storytelling was a skill. And because of my background, as in leadership, so really understanding firsthand the challenges of leadership, also my experience in change management, so understanding how you roll out a new strategy, or values or culture, and also my literally hands on experience, designing and delivering leadership programs, there was part of me that thought, I think I could teach people how to tell storytelling, I left NAB, because I had a five year plan to be head of Global Head of learning for NAB, I had a five year plan. And I was working towards that. And I'd done my MBA as part of that plan. And I'd taken on a whole heap of experience, and it was pretty much five years to the day. And the Global Head of learning position became available through a restructure, and I applied for it, thinking, I'm so going to get this and, and I didn't, I still remember the time the woman, you know, who I knew really well and really respected. She just said, I'm not going to offer you this job. And you know, she talked about why. And she said, It's been a really hard decision, because you'd be really good at it, but I'm not going to offer to you. And she said, What do you think you're going to do? And I said, I think it's time to go. And I still remember her leaning over the desk and putting her hand on mine and said, I think it's time for you to go to you've been talking about doing your own thing. You've been talking about this storytelling. You know, there was a lovely 17 year retrenchment package on the table. I just decided to leave. And I remember walking out of there, Ricky, my husband, who's you know, we don't normally bring each other at work. And I told him, I'm about I just decided to leave. And you know, it's one of those things, what's the worst thing can happen? My daughters were two and five. And I just thought, I'll give this a go for a couple of years. If it doesn't work out, I've been home with the kids. And I'll just come back and get a corporate job. Don't like to me a lot of people go oh my god, it was such a risk. It was like there was no risk at all in my eyes. I'll just give this give it a crack.

Helga Svendsen 8:59

Fantastic. So out of interest. How long ago was that?

Gabrielle Dolan 9:02

That was 18 years ago, when you think about storytelling in organizations. No one was talking about that 18 years ago. And in fact, I had a lot of people say to me, can I just check, you left your senior job at NAB to teach people storytelling is like, Yep, it was pretty quiet for the 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 years, spending a lot of time educating the market on why storytelling is an absolute critical leadership skill, communication skill, influencing skill, why it's critical. So I mean, now I sort of can't keep up with demand. Everyone's just ringing going we need storytelling training, which is good.

Helga Svendsen 9:43

Well, it's interesting, I think, because you're right, it is more talked about, I guess, in corporate world really about why it's important. I'm not sure it's talked about so much in boardrooms and why it's important yet. You've talked about leadership. You've talked about change. You've talked about influence. All things that are key in the boardroom. So I'd be interested in your thoughts about what's your views on why it's important for the boardroom?

Gabrielle Dolan 10:07

Yeah, well, I think a couple of things. I mean, I don't know how much is spoken at the board, but like normally at the executive leadership team level when they can, you know, they're in charge of, or how do we roll out the strategy, how do we communicate the values? How do we drive this digital change, or whatever, and they're going, we need storytelling. So first of all, to actually even get on the board, you'd be want to be really good at storytelling, that's like a job interview for for want of a better word. So you need to be selling, the value you can bring to that board through stories so that it's storytelling, it's critical for anyone in that position to get on a board or get promoted or get a new job. But when you think of what a board does, a lot of the times they're influencing, they've got to influence each other. So how you can come in and board member, you might be there for your marketing expertise, for example. So how can you influence the rest of the board members to take this serious, you might have a really strong focus around risk or culture or innovation? So how do you influence the rest of the board members for that, so that that storytelling then becomes a critical role to influence your board members, like if you do need to influence the CEO or influence the executive leadership team or any other key stakeholders, if you're in a position where you need to communicate your message more effectively, and influence, and I would suggest that's a big part of a board members role, then storytelling should be something that you are saying, I need to get better at.

Helga Svendsen 11:37

Yeah, that connection also with the executive, the executive, or the organization also needs to know how to tell stories. So the board needs to recognize that as well, I think yeah, okay.

Gabrielle Dolan 11:47

Yeah, absolutely. And I say get better at it. And look, I know, I'm biased here, because this is my job, and I teach people. But this is a skill, sharing stories effectively, in a professional setting is a skill. Where I've seen storytelling go wrong, is when people do it. And maybe they go, Oh, you need to start telling stories, without any training. And they just make all the classic mistakes, or they share stories that are completely inappropriate, or they go way too long, or they miss the mark. It's an absolute skill. And if it wasn't a skill, everyone would be doing it or doing it well. And we know that's not the case. So I mean, part of what I love about my job is I feel like I give people permission. And

when I say permission, it was like a lot of senior execs and board members too, it never even occurred to me to share personal stories. So I feel like I give them the permission, but then give them the capability and the confidence to actually do it well.

Helga Svendsen 12:43

Okay, so, of course, the next thing is we know why it's important then. And people need to know how to do it. In the next 10 minutes. What are they? What are some key tips for board members in thinking about this?

Gabrielle Dolan 13:00

Yeah, look, I'll look, I'll give you some key tips. I mean, clearly, you know, first, if you get me in to help you. That's the first step. The first thing is you need to be very clear on your message. So one of the most common mistakes people make and boards make and board and probably executive leadership team make this as well, is they go, we need to come up with our organizational story, or our brand story or our strategy story. So first of all, it's not one story, when I see people say this is our organizational story, I just look at it and I go, it's not even a story. Like it's your strategy on a page and they go, oh, yeah, it's our strategy on a page, I go, Well, don't call it a story, because it's not a story. That's your strategy on a page. And we can bring that to life with stories. So the first thing is, you've got to be really clear on your single message, your one single message. So even as an individual, if you want to talk about innovation is your subject or your what you were trying to influence people on, it'd be What do you mean by innovation. And when I work with, you know, senior leaders, and we go through this process, so they, for example, they might be communicating their values, and one of their values might be integrity, and I will pull one of them at random, and it doesn't matter who I pull it random 98% this is the same thing. I go, just in your own words, tell me what integrity means to you. And they'll go I mean, you know, telling the truth, like, Yeah, what else does it mean? It means and they'll sit there and go. Oh, gee, I don't know, you've put me on the spot here. I haven't really thought about this much before. These will be the senior execs that have not thought about the company values for more than 20 seconds about what it means to them personally. So that's part of the process I work through with teams helping them be really clear on their message. And then once you're clear on the message, my point of differentiation in the market is focused on the personal stories. So all the work stories are really valid. Okay. Integrity give us an example of where you've done that work. That's the default of 95% of the people. But your most powerful stories will be your personal stories. For example, if I want to push my team into, let's just have a go. And if it doesn't work, let's try something different. I'm going to share the story about my mum. And yes, I will have worked stories to back that up like when we did this three years ago, and last year, but the most powerful story, the one everyone will connect with and remember is the story about my mum, then there's some really basic tips around storytelling, like keep them succinct, less than two minutes. Doesn't matter how exciting or intriguing. You think your story is in a professional setting. People will be thinking after a couple of minutes get to the point. And if anyone has ever said to you get to the point, they've been thinking it a hell of a lot longer before they've said it. There's a framework I take people through to get them that sent. A couple of other absolutely

critical is the story has to be true. How you'd be surprised, amazed, I am still amazed how a conversations can go on in a long time when I'm working with senior executives around do their personal stories need to be true. It astounds me and where some people are going, but as long as it's believable and gets the point across. Doesn't really matter.

Helga Svendsen 16:24

Is this right after the conversation about integrity?

Gabrielle Dolan 16:27

Yes, yes. Yeah. And I like I point out the irony of that, the reason they're thinking made up stories is because they probably have and the reason they've made up stories in the past is because they don't think their personal stories are relevant or important. Like they might be thinking, I've got that story about my mom, but who would care about that? Everyone cares about that, because that's, that's what we connect with. And you know, every time you retell a personal story, you don't just retell it, you relive it, and people sense that. So they're the main things. And I guess there's some really minor little technical tips. Don't start your story with let me tell you a story. And don't end it with the moral of the story is there just like a please, there's a whole really good tips and techniques and frameworks, I take people to get clarity on your story, how you find these stories, and then how you share them with great effect.

Helga Svendsen 17:20

Oh, there is so much in there that already rings true. But I'm particularly thinking about the keeping it brief one, possibly partly because I'm a workshop facilitator. And sometimes, you know, you're getting people to share, and you're just like, oh, my gosh, this is taking a bit longer than I had expected. And even you know, we were talking about getting on boards before, as part of one of the programs that I run, we do practice interviews. And you can see where people get a bit lost in their stories. And it does go on and you're just like, I've lost the point here, what the point of the story is and where we are in it.

Gabrielle Dolan 17:50

Yeah. And I think in interviews, people get nervous too. So they just keep talking, talking, talking. One of the books I've written is storytelling for job interviews. It's just like, it's actually a really, really tiny book. But the thing is, just keep them short. And then if people want to ask you more information, they'll ask you more information. But yeah, I think I think one of the problems with job interviews is people get really nervous, and then they just start rambling on, and they don't practice your stories. That's the opposite. You got to practice your stories. I would say as a board member I can what are the things you want to be known for? And is it integrity? Is it risk taking? Is it strategic,

have stories around that have personal ones or work ones and practice them? Practice makes them better?

Helga Svendsen 18:30

I totally could not agree more. And it's exactly why we do practice interviews. All of the big interviews that I've gone for I've always done a practice first. In fact, some I've gone straight from the practice interview into the real one, just when you've given it a run. So absolutely practicing.

Gabrielle Dolan 18:46

Well, practice makes better than we should ever try for perfect on anything. But practice makes better. And again, I'll have some people go, I won't practice it, because then it won't sound authentic. It was like it will. It'll just be better. And you won't be rambling, rambling.

Helga Svendsen 19:03

Oh, all right. There is some magic tips in there already. And unbelievably, we are getting towards time. But before we finish up, I said right at the outset that in your intro, you talked about meeting Barack Obama, and I have to return to it in as much detail as you're able to share. Tell us the story.

Gabrielle Dolan 19:22

It was three years ago, I actually got an email from the Obama Foundation saying they're running a leadership program across Asia Pacific. And they they want to include storytelling in and I got that email and I just thought someone is pulling my leg here. It's just so I respond. And then I set up a meeting and they said, Oh, you know, we looked at your website and it was like, You are the one we want. It was in Malaysia. It was at the end of 2019. And it was it was my it was gonna be my daughter Alex's 19th birthday and I have a bit of a rule that I don't travel on the kid's birthday but because she had finished uni She came with me, it was for a week and I ran five workshops throughout. Barack Obama was speaking on the last day, and we were told we are never going to meet him, you're never going to meet him. He is literally flying in and flying out. And so he flew in, and we all went and watched him talk. And we were actually told he'd left he'd already left. But I was sitting speaking to one of the participants about storytelling and, and then all the participants got called in to take the official photos. So they all had to go in the room. And I said, That's alright, I'll just wait for you when you come out. And then Barack Obama walked past is completely surrounded by security guards. He walked into the room to get the official photo, and mean a few other speakers and my daughter was sitting there and it was like, Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my god, the security guards come up to you and go, just to remind you, you are not allowed to approach him. You are not allowed to ask for photos. And you know, they're standing there with their hands on the gun. It was like, okay, okay, relax. One of the other speakers said, when he comes out, let's draw him



to us without energy. Normally, I'd go yeah, whatever. But I'm gonna Yes, yes, let's, and he came out, I don't know, if we were drawing with your energy, or we just look like, you know, silly, excited school girls. And anyway, he broke ranks, he came over, he spent a few minutes talking to each of us about what we did and what we were speaking on. And he clearly must know, the rule of you can't ask for a photo. And so he said, let's get a photo with the speakers. So I've pushed my daughter. So there's a photo that's up in my office. And it's, when I say under his armpit, it's because he's very tall. And we're very short. And then me next to him and a couple of other speakers. So that's, as I say, in the classic, that photo went straight to the pool room.

Helga Svendsen 21:48

Oh, my God, I love that. And I love I actually love the let's use our energy to draw him towards us.

Gabrielle Dolan 21:56

Yeah, yeah, I did, too. And it was just like, we will be on energy. And I will probably just smiling, just smiling. And like, you know, I like him and admire him. Like, I reckon it took me about half an hour for my heart to come down. It was, it was just amazing. And, and when he walked away, it was like, you cannot fake that authenticity. So I know, there's some leaders that would get a whole lot of training in that because that's their job. You cannot fake that, because I've met other prime ministers and stuff, and you walk away going that felt sleazy type thing. Yes. So yeah, he's he's one of the best. He's and he's a great storyteller. And he's a great presenter.

Helga Svendsen 22:34

Yeah. You know, I think it's probably his early days as a community organizer, going out and meeting people and needing to connect quickly with people through authenticity. I suspect that has put him in good stead. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Fantastic. Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that story. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Gabrielle Dolan 22:57

Look, I would say, as humans, you already tell stories. But there is an absolute skill in sharing Well, in business. And when I run my workshops, I reckon the biggest feedback I get is people go, this is a bit harder than I thought. And it is, I would say, get better at it, invest in it, like we invest in public speaking like we do that invest in storytelling Now, clearly, I'm the best there is. Find someone that can teach you storytelling. There's a lot of books out about it at the moment. There's a lot of people running courses on storytelling. If you want your people to get better at this. Set them up for success by teaching them the skills and do not set them up for failure by just telling them that we need to start sharing stories, because that is irresponsible completely irresponsible.

Helga Svendsen 23:47

Yep. Fantastic. I mean, you've already mentioned one resource. I'm about to ask you if there's a resource that you would like to share with the take on board community. You all already mentioned, Steve Dennings books, I will find a link to that and pop it in the show notes. Yeah,

Gabrielle Dolan 23:59

I must admit, it was good book I read. It's 20 years old, and it is a bit thick. I would I'd go with one of mine. Seriously, I feel like I'm joking. The half plugging, but on my website. So Gabrielle Dolan.com. I do have a seven day free storytelling starter kit. It does what it says it's literally if you're thinking, How do I get started on that. It's just contains little short videos. And I'll just it will just be the starter kit. I am running a my only public workshop for the year is coming up on the 14th of December and that's virtual. I only do two a year. So that's there won't be another one for quite a while. And of course if you know if someone's sitting there and go, Yeah, we need to get our people and teams involved in that. 99% of the work I do is in house training.

Helga Svendsen 24:47

Yeah, great. Oh, fantastic. All right. We'll make sure we put all of those contact details in the show notes and make sure we put this episode to air well before the 14th of December for people as well. Fantastic. Oh, Gabrielle, thank you so much for sharing some of your wisdom and insights and stories about storytelling for board members and why it's so important and some of the tips on how you do it. I know that the take on board community will really find this valuable. So thank you for being with us here today.

Gabrielle Dolan 25:17

Thank you. It's been a whole lot of fun