



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 328

Transcript – Giselle McLachlan wants to help prepare your boardroom for the future

Helga Svendsen: Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Giselle McLaughlin about creating the future in the boardroom. Before we start the podcast today, as always, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record for me. I am on the Unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

I also pay my respects to any First Nations people who may be listening or watching today. I acknowledge their continuing connections to land, waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now, let me tell you about Giselle. Giselle is on the boards of AbacusBio and Chairs the Audit and Risk Committee of Local Government New Zealand. Grounded founder Giselle McLaughlin is a governance and leadership specialist. Giselle is all about down to earth governance and business advice, and thrives on building sustainable businesses alongside healthy leaders and lives.

Giselle loves working with others who love learning, growing, and creating a better future. Oh, well then Giselle, we just love having you here. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast.

Giselle McLachlan: It's great to be here and I'm just greeting you in the Māori language from New Zealand where I'm based. So kia ora means I wish you good health.

Helga Svendsen: Oh, well it, that actually segues beautifully because as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. So I'd love to know where were your parents born and where are your ancestors from?

Giselle McLachlan: So I am absolutely a Scottish blood, a Scottish immigrant father who came to our tier New Zealand in 1960, and my mother was born here, but her grandparents were from Scotland.

So on one side, first generation on the other side, third generation. And yeah, we can talk about Scotland as home, and yet, of course it's not. How strange when you go there that it does feel like home.

Helga Svendsen: Oh my goodness. I agree. I've been to lands of a few A of ancestors all over the place. We've got family everywhere and it does feel somehow grounding.

Speaking of grounded, I don't know, I can't explain it, but there is something there. So you grew up in New Zealand, were you born and grew up in New Zealand and siblings. Tell me about the family unit.

Giselle McLachlan: Oh, the family unit, like probably almost every single family isn't quite as neat and tidy as what you might call a nuclear family.

So I was one of four children, but um, sort of blended if you like, and we all grew up knowing how fortunate we. Were to be born here, raised here, a place of privilege. And actually my dad has just published a book himself about his life growing up in Scotland and it's called *My Goebbels Life*. He grew up in what was described really as the world worst slum in the western world at the time.

And yeah, so we had that fairly firmly in the front of our family life and like how

Helga Svendsen: fortunate. Again, but it sounds something, something you didn't directly experience, but you do experience it through that family lineage, I guess. Okay. So, oh, New Zealand has such a better relationship with their First Nations people than we do here in Australia, so you will definitely know this.

So what are the names of the traditional owners or first peoples of where you grew

Giselle McLachlan: up? It's actually a very interesting topic, and I don't want to trade on the sort of international reputation that New Zealand has for having great relationships with, with its First Nations. So the Māori people who of course consist of a, a whole range of iwi, that's kind of like the tribal name.

What I would say is that our bicultural society is very much a state of. Evolution. There's a hint of revolution there possibly coming, but it has been a fascinating time to grow up from, you know, being a child until now I'm 60 and so over that 50 years of cultural awareness, I would say we have evolved a lot.

We are a country with three official languages, English, Māori, and sign language. Oh, I did not know that. So when I was a child and people really spoke Māori, and yet now it's a very common thing for people to have some capability of speaking Māori. It's something that I think about a lot and I'm fortunate in my work to be learning from.

Leaders who are who Papa Papa Māori regularly. And it's an absolutely joyful and challenging experience to realize how much we don't understand and how much we lost as a country, actually. So we could spend the whole hour. Talking about creating that future. I think it's a really, really interesting, no one can predict where we're going to get to, but in only 15 years it will be the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.

And so I think for our country, that's something that we will all be thinking about. Not everyone's positive about it, but I think it's going to be very, very much a, a future focus for us as a country.

Helga Svendsen: Oh, again, you're right. We could go down any number of rabbit holes and spend the entire time in the introduction, but of course, in Victoria, we have just introduced the Treaty to Parliament in Victoria, our first treaty, so to hear.

You've had treaty for 200 years. Of course, Australia has no treaty. We have, at least in Victoria, just introduced it to Parliament. But anyway. Well, that's something I need to tune into because I did not know that. So just this week when we're recording folks, when you listen to this, it will be a while ago and we'll have advanced down the line a little bit, but just this week as we record, okay, so tell me how many languages do you speak?

Giselle McLachlan: So speak in terms of being able to have conversation. I would say three. So English, French, German. I was fluent in French and German, but really didn't use them a lot until recently where I've been doing a little bit of travel, but also got on duo lingo, which is if anyone on watching this is a Duolingo fan, acknowledging that you can learn languages, maths, music, and now chess.

I'm a big fan of a bite-sized learning every day, which connects you with other people and you help each other to learn. It is just fabulous and I want to really support, acknowledge the role that my son has played in this because he, having never learned another language as a young person, he is now in his 700 and something day of learning Japanese.

And I'm so proud of him. But I'm also thankful that he got me back into language learning. So now I'm on day 500 and something of French every day in a row. And the connection through that is, is just joyful and creating the future.

Helga Svendsen: After this, you and I are going to become duo buddies because I'm a duo person as well.

I'm on my 900th or something. Day of Italian when I recently did the Jatbula hike. Things I should not be worried about, but I'm like, I'm going to lose my streak because you are offline anyway, whatever. I did not lose my streak. Fortunately, whatever, we'll become duo buddies after this.

Giselle McLachlan: Great. But isn't that fascinating that you find there's a love of learning through it?

Helga Svendsen: Yeah, it is interesting. You're right. Doing it daily how it just, things embed. Sometimes it'll say, you know, write this sentence. I'm like, I don't know what that word is. It's something like this. I'll put it down. It's like, oh wow, that's actually quite close. So you do, somehow it does somehow embed.

Giselle McLachlan: Yeah, and look, I want to take this idea the quite close. Let's just jump with that because quite close is a little bit like saying good enough governance. And this is something I've been teasing out for the best part of a couple of years now. I really don't love

the phrase and best practice governance because it sets such a high bar. I've been engaging in the idea that something is better than nothing and good enough. Governance is like rightsizing governance for your organisation for its situation. So I spend a lot of time on this with in various things. I just really want to encourage everyone to continuously evolve their governance practice instead of thinking, oh, we, you know, there's so many things that we should be doing and we are not best practice.

That's okay. Quite close. Italian is better than no Italian at all.

Helga Svendsen: Could not agree more and look at you go segueing us into the conversation. And it's interesting, I think also that governance, it's not a one size fits all. It's not like here's the checklist, just make it happen. It needs to be contextualized to your own organisation, to the stage of business development you're at.

Whatever it may be. So quite close actually might be perfect for you and your organisation. Quite close, might, might be best quite close. And best practice can actually be one and the same.

Giselle McLachlan: I think that's right, but we have to help people understand that because they don't, and you'll often have tension in boardrooms and you've got people, we've got so many things we need to do and we can't afford to do them all, or we don't have the capability.

So yeah, helping people leapfrog from nothing to good enough, I think is part of what we like to do.

Helga Svendsen: Well, as I say, thank you. Let's segue into the conversation. So we're talking about creating the future, how we can do that at the board level, at the individual level. Where should we start the conversation?

Giselle McLachlan: Well, I think when we talk about creating the future, if we look at it through a governance lens, you've often got the idea that boards should be working on strategy. That's so much a part of their job. And we talk about, you know, more time in the windscreen, less time in the rear view mirror. And I think that's a big theme for boards in the work that we do at Grounded.

But also the other work that I'm engaged with, other ways that I work and. Really helping boards to plan their time. Well spend more time creating the future and less time looking down and checking over what other people are doing. I think is a really good start to doing good governance.

Helga Svendsen: And is there from the boards that you are on boards or committees that you are on in as much detail as you're able to share, because sometimes that's a bit tricky, but I'm wondering if there's a story, snippets of stories that you are able to share from your boardroom experience around that, looking through the front window rather than looking in the rear view mirror.

Giselle McLachlan: Yeah, well, what I would just reflect, as you mentioned in the introduction, I've got two board roles or governance roles at the moment, but I've had a, a wide variety from commercial community and what I'm experimenting with calling civil, so that's the three Cs for the civil as you know, central government.

Uh, local government roles. And I think I would make an observation that most of them, including me. Spend too much time looking back, worrying, tying their governance rhythms and routines to the financial monthly reporting, things like that. And so when I talk about the windscreen rather than the review mirror, that is me learning from my own mistakes and what I've observed, and almost all boards.

Too much time doing oversight, not enough time. Creating a future, not enough time. Actually building their own teamwork, their own board culture and board excellence. And if we think about a wide range of board culture issues, so many things are, they need work looking forward. So succession planning or training, how many boards right now are thinking, again, afresh about what skills do we need on our board with the advent of a VUCA environment and volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

We need people who can deal with that and be agile. And we also need people who can think about, for example, only AI for their organisations. Those are skills that we didn't even think about three, four years ago, other than in rare. So yeah, it's.

Helga Svendsen: Yeah, it's interesting, so I know the boards that I'm on.

Definitely. I mean, I had this conversation with somebody yesterday actually. Tech has been hot as a board skill for, I don't know, five, 10, probably more years. But AI right now is, historically tech has been about privacy and cybersecurity and tech transformation and all that sort of stuff. But you're right, AI is hot right now.

And boards broadly, I know. I know I don't really understand ai. I've done a little bit of training around it, a little bit of learning around it, and often executive teams also don't understand ai, partly because it's moving so quickly. So nobody really understands a ai. Anybody who says they understand AI probably just shows they don't.

So yeah, it's interesting. You're right. Thinking about the skills for the future, future thinking in and of itself

Giselle McLachlan: is a skill. That's right. Taking yourself into, I call sometimes, depending on what my environment is. I call what we do at Grounded Governance Yoga, which is stretching people into uncomfortable places.

And it's often where I spend a lot of time in preparing to run a workshop, whether it's on strategy or. Board culture and teamwork or whatever, actually thinking, I know they're going to be uncomfortable. How do I get uncomfortable? And it's the same with chairing a board. You know? How do you set the tone?

And I thought I'd share a little story just from a meeting this morning that I attended where I wasn't on the board, but I attended. And this board's practice is to start every board

meeting with a leadership moment that someone on the board speaks to about how they see leadership, and it was really, really impressive the way that the person spoke.

Really challenging and I thought, oh, that's something I can use straight away. And that's about getting people comfortable, uncomfortable with having to speak up, having to share what they stand for. Getting everybody thoughtful in a, you know, uncomfortable. Safe way if that's not a contradiction. So yeah.

Really, really top of mind. Right. Interesting.

Helga Svendsen: Okay. I love that. So it was each board meeting, one board member is allocated to share a leadership moment.

Giselle McLachlan: Yes. Which is, you know, warming up the room. And that's what we need to do, whether we are in a board meeting or a learning environment. Another example of we do on one board that I've been involved with for, for a while is we select one of the organisation's values at the beginning of the meeting to highlight and use, and then at the end, go back over will.

Did we, did we actually demonstrate that value? That's a really simple but interesting way to reflect the values of the organisation in the boardroom.

Helga Svendsen: It's interesting when you, it's, you probably can see, I'm jotting down a few notes as we speak so I can remember to come back to things and when you talked about the leadership moment, what I jotted down was connect to the values.

So they, it, it could be either or like a leadership moment that is connected to the. The values overall, or a value, or even the strategic direction or a pillar or whatever it may be. And likewise. So again, in that second example, is it, I don't know, the values are whatever, transparency, respect, open listening, whatever they might be, and the board chooses one of those at the start listening.

And then at the end, how well did we listen?

Giselle McLachlan: Yes, exactly.

Helga Svendsen: Interesting. Okay. And in fact, thinking about it, future focus, even if it's not a value, could be something that the board says at the start of the meeting, we are going to focus on the future in this meeting, or at least for agenda items, A, B, and C. And then at the end, how well did we focus on the future?

Did we go back to the old grooves of, well, what's the monthly finances from last month? Or did we actually try to look around corners to what's coming up in the future?

Giselle McLachlan: Exactly. So if we take that idea that we've warmed up the room to be effective, to be in governance mindset, to be leaders, then that gets everybody ready to contribute.

I think then good governance is getting those diverse views on the table.

Helga Svendsen: All right, so what I'm hearing is there's some tools to warm up the room. I love that. So that you're ready to stretch and do your yoga. Not sure if I want to think about yoga with in some of the boardrooms, but anyway, let's, let's not go down that alleyway.

So you warm up the room with some of these tools. Then dive on in with the diverse groups making these great conversations about the future. What are some tips and tools there when you are in the conversation, what advice or what stories can you share that might help us there?

Giselle McLachlan: Well, I think the lens that I'm really, really focused on at the moment is from the perspective of the chair.

So that's partly because I'm chairing in both of the roles that I'm doing. So I'm really focused on it.

Helga Svendsen: I'm about to step into a new chair role, Giselle, so, you know, happy to take on.

Giselle McLachlan: Oh, well, and maybe I'll talk about that, but, so the reason I'm really focused on that though more is that. I don't know, four or five years ago I asked the community where I live in Wanaka, which is the Māori name from this region, and it means a place of learning, by the way, which is super nice to ground myself here, but.

I asked the community, what can I do to help? And they said we would love more effort and focus on training chairs because if the chair's going well, then the rest of the board will be more enabled, perhaps less distracted or ineffective. A bad way of saying that they're, they're not doing as well as they could.

And so we've spent a lot of time developing a whole range of products, ways of helping chairs in which we are running at the moment, a new course, but. Because of that, I'm constantly thinking through the chair lens or how can I help them? And so I'm always, always picking up new ideas. So as the chair, couple of thoughts.

The first one is I talk about the chairs needing to be Switzerland. So they're neutral until we're not. So every chair is wearing two hats. They are the chair of the board with jobs to do, and they are also a director, trustee, whatever that looks like, entitled to at least one vote, one opinion on things and maybe they've got a casting vote, which is why I say at least one vote, but they might also have two according to certain rules. And so that chair, I just encourage to be through the meeting you are in charge of, of that meeting process and getting to good decisions, which means you don't have to.

Disclose what your view is on things until the time is right, and that is not when you open an agenda item. So it's really astonishing how many people that's helpful for, because so many chairs feel like they've got to show their colours and what they think, or even intentionally or otherwise use their opinion as an opening statement, which makes it very difficult for people to.

Directors are people too. They're affected by the strong voice or the leading voice in the room. So yeah, that's something that, um, I think during a meeting with chairs is keep your thoughts to yourself until it's time for you to share your view. And then linked to that, I think for all directors is the opportunity to think and listen.

Not to be firmly of the opinion, and certainly for me, one of the roles that I've had on board was I was a, what they call a lay person, so not medical on New Zealand's medical council, which is,

and. That role was the best role for learning through the dialogue that I've had. It was fabulous and it was really fascinating. It's a big board, by the way, but to see the medical people disagreeing with each other as they do and everyday practice, bringing that discipline into the room, engaging and in the end, then getting to a consensus, occasionally a vote, when that was necessary.

And that really helped me not to feel bad about not knowing the answer before I walked in the room. We have a mindset that we need to prepare so we know what we think. And I could do that on some things, but there were some topics which I simply couldn't, there's no way I would know, but I would then take the information and form a view and, and, and feel free to say, you know, it was my turn to speak.

I don't know, you don't want to hear from others. And then at the end you could come back and say, well, now I'm. I'm comfortable. This is the right direction. It was a very good experience, and I don't think I could say any other board that I've been on has that same opportunity for dialogue to really drive decisions.

Helga Svendsen: I've been on a, um, health service board as well. I'm not from the health sector, and I think I find it, it's part of the value then that I provided to that board was I didn't know. So it's licensed to ask the stupid questions. You have to be a little careful about that. You can't ask too many really stupid questions, but it is an opportunity for people who all know their areas really well, to have to talk about why things are done that way, or how things are done that way.

And a bit of a view of, oh, well, you know, things are done this way over here. What do you think about that? Interesting.

Giselle McLachlan: Yes. That was interesting too, and I think that was a board where I was able to add real value, but not where I thought I would. I probably won't say anymore about that.

Helga Svendsen: Yes, and I, and I love your point at the start about for everybody thinking and listening and not a firmly held opinion.

I will just, as soon as you said that, I don't know if people will be able to see this because it's blue, written on blue, but I have a post-it note here that says, strong opinions loosely held. And I keep that sitting on my screen as a bit of a guide. It's like, sure, have your strong opinions, but don't hold onto them so closely because you're operating as a group and you want that group to come up with the best outcome, not your outcome.

Which as you say is even more important from the chair. Yes, exactly. Oh, Giselle, I knew there would be way too much so. I'm wondering from the conversation that we've had today, we've talked about warming up the room, we've talked about some tips in the room for boards, thinking future, future making, and the role of the future for the board.

What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Giselle McLachlan: Well, as you say, there's so much and we have only just got started, so maybe we'll talk again. But I think the things I would say is don't be afraid to rightsize your governance for your organisation. So don't let perfection get in the way of good enough.

Do some governance, yoga, get uncomfortable and really stretch yourselves. You won't create a better future for your organisation. Its stakeholders unless you are operating in the unsafe. The third key thing is the importance of creating the future. Looking in the windscreen, not the rear view mirror as much as you can while discharging your other duties.

So I think the other thing, uh, that I would like to finish up on is the fact that every governor's role is a chance to help other people. And that's what I'm about as a person. That's what I think governance does. We create the future through helping others, and, uh, something to be really proud of actually, for anyone who's serving on a board.

Helga Svendsen: Absolutely. Oh, okay. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Giselle McLachlan: Oh, we've got heaps of resources on our website, so you can find that at www.groundedgovernance.co.nz. Lots of ideas there. But yeah, we certainly had better help anybody who would.

Helga Svendsen: Awesome, and we will put a link to that in the show notes as well.

So folks, if like me, you're out walking, listening to this. I mean, if you're watching it, you might not be out walking, but wherever you are, we'll make sure there is a link in the show notes as well.

Giselle McLachlan: I appreciate that.

Helga Svendsen: Oh, Giselle, thank you. Thank you so much for coming along and having the yarn and sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

I know I've taken a bit away from it. There's some tips for me in terms of warming up the room, getting flexible for governance, yoga, and for sharing. So thank you so much for sharing your tips and trips.

Giselle McLachlan: Thanks for what you are doing to build a community of women, particularly who are doing good work as best they can.

Oh, it's important.

Helga Svendsen: Yay. Look at us go. Excellent. Thanks so much for being here.

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