

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 223

Transcript – Jacinta Cubis is a master facilitator who wants chairs to approach the role this way.



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Jacinta Cubis about the role of chair as facilitator, and indeed, maybe even others that can facilitate in the boardroom. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me, I am on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present, I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture.

Now, let me introduce the Jacinta. Jacinta is a creative master facilitator. She loves guiding groups to connect make decisions, generate ideas and solve problems. Specializing in Visual Thinking Jacinta creates captivating cartoons that simplify complex issues with 25 years of experience Jacinta is the go to facilitator, trainer and mentor for clients in government, universities, and community organisations as well as consultants and facilitators. Her illustrated ebook 'Hum' troubleshoots problems with online meetings. When Jacinta is not facilitating or helping you learn how to do that you can find her on the yoga mat in her art studio, or on the tennis court or the tango dance floor. I should also say that whilst Jacinta is not on a board at the moment, she's an alumnus of the Take on Board KickStarter program. So I am still hopeful that her wisdom and her practice will join a boardroom sometime soon. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast Jacinta.

Jacinta Cubis 1:26

Thanks, Helga. And I still remember that KickStarter program. I still use your how to talk about yourself, like positioning, the four sorts of things, particularly the story stuff. So I recommend that program to so many people.

Helga Svendsen 1:40

Well, thank you. Well, it is awesome to have you as part of that. Like I say, we're still going to get you in the boardroom one day.

Jacinta Cubis 1:47

Great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:48

So Jacinta, as always, before we dig into the chair as facilitator, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about younger Jacinta that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Jacinta Cubis 1:59

Well, actually, I went back to a blog I wrote about this because we moved house recently. And so you go through old photo albums, and I'm old enough to have photo albums and looking through the photos I was reminded of, I guess my journey for want of a better word. And so many photos in places like Timor Leste, Zambia, Vietnam, Cambodia. And I know you asked about the little Jacinta, that I'll get there. And it reminded me that I think I learned why I'm a facilitator is because I think I learned my best lessons. And I saw the impact of my aid worker colleagues, you know, sitting on well swept dirt floors in Timor Leste and Zambia, just listening, just listening, occasionally asking a considered question, and drawing out the best thinking of the group affected by the aid program. Right. So it was, I was there to take photos and write stories, communications background, but it was watching my aid worker colleagues that I now look back go, I reckon that's the best facilitation lesson I ever had. To draw out people's best thinking is to just listen and ask good questions. And that took me back to when did I really start facilitating, I reckon everyone facilitates if you've hosted a party, if you've hosted a dinner party, if you've done Christmas lunch, you're pretty much facilitating but grade six, bossy Jacinta, little dictator, producing one of my own plays. It's probably not my proudest facilitation moment. But in listening to a few of your podcasts, one of your other guests said something about she thought the little Karen I think it was might have been a bit bossy, too. So I reckon my first experience of facilitating was producing a play in grade six. But I learned much better lessons a lot later in the international development field. And I think I love bringing people together. I love connecting people and I love helping groups come up with their own. They do, it's the spark that they come up with their own ideas to, to the problems. I don't have all the answers. I don't have any of the answers but I hopefully have a good process that will get the best answers from a group if that makes sense?

Helga Svendsen 2:13

I've got in my head young... I'm not gonna say bossy Jacinta, I'm gonna say assertive, Jacinta or strong, Jacinta young Jacinta that was bringing that play together. And it's so I'm just going to pick up on that thing about photos, it's so interesting what you say about photo albums. I recently went to a reunion of my, I did law at Monash and we had a bit of a reunion of our colleagues and trying to find photos of those days was really challenging. They just don't exist in the same way as they do now.

I've got maybe a dozen photos of my seven years at Monash, yes, it's a five year degree but I got a little distracted with, you know, the student newspaper and other things. So yeah, it's interesting how photos just they've changed. They have changed a little.

Jacinta Cubis 5:00

Yeah, and actually talking about photos, now this is going down another completely different pathway. But it's one of the things I also call myself a facilitator. So photos actually something that we all have access to. And it's, it's helpful for boards as well, like, literally look, I just even want to dumb it down a bit. Boards are really just like another team. It's just like any group. So sometimes I've had other facilitators, because some would say to me, I'm going before a corporate board, and I've got to help do this. And they're just people. Yes, they have a serious governance responsibility. But so they need to connect too. And this one thing that I think is missing from board meetings, is the time to connect. High powered people, lots of pressure, big decisions, but connect before content and protect the connection back to your photos, it's often the best way to connect people really fast and really deep, because photos actually do release. And I don't quote me on what the chemicals are. But they are chemicals that promote connection, and chemicals that sort of promote empathy. And so you can build empathy and trust really fast by using photos at the start of a board meeting, if that's not too weird to go down that track. But a simple thing like, pull out your phones, we all share what over a million photos on Instagram every day anyway, just before we start, pull out your phones, and try and relate it to the topic on the agenda. But it might be something like if you're talking about the future, it could be something like, just find a photo that says hope to you. Right? And find a photo, keep it clean people and show that photo to your partner, the person sitting next to you. What do they see, it's just a lovely conversation. You never know what it generates. And we've already had a personal connection, not about the agenda, not about the budget, not about remuneration or anything. But just connecting his people takes three minutes. So I'm distracted there. But you mentioned photos. So it's one of the tools that I use and that everyone has at their fingertips.

Helga Svendsen 7:09

Oh my god, see folks gold already. And you're segwaying as beautifully into the conversation. So there's already a tip for board chairs, committee chairs, possibly even just inverted commas, any board members who was showing up for a board meeting, I presumably that doesn't have to be part of the formal board meeting, you might just be showing up and having a chat to the person you sitting next to you might just do it as part of that informality, not part of the meeting at all. It's like oh, today we're talking about, I don't know, REM, or we're talking about the future or whatever. What's a photo you'd like? You could just do it as part of the fun prior to the meeting, couldn't you?

Jacinta Cubis 7:43

Yeah, and look, if you're talking about REM, that's money, show a photo, the last big purchase you made or show a photo of something where you've got more value than you paid for or show a photo or I don't know something, you can find a question related to it. If you can't, it's just pick a photo of something that gives you hope, because appreciative because you want the discussion to be appreciative. Maybe that's enough. But that leads me to I actually think engagement, because we're talking about how to encourage our board members to engage and contribute to the conversation in a way that suits them. But engagement starts well before they're in the meeting. It starts from, you know, when they get the papers and all that sort of stuff. So I actually think it's really important. I have an arrival question. So I remember I did this with one board. And they were really surprised to see this big question. Look, it doesn't have to be fancy, written up in butchers paper. But if you're online, it's you hold it up to the screen or you're typing in the chat and arrival questions, something like what's one thing you know a lot about, it's got nothing to do with being on boards. So for you, it's veggie gardens. For me it's painting or playing tennis or whatever. And it led to a really nice stand up discussion over coffee. And there were about three new board members. This was in the middle of all the lockdowns. So it was almost an induction for new board members face to face for the first time in maybe 12 months. And it just, it's like you turn up to a party, you know, that awkward thing. You've got to give people something to do, no matter how well they know each other. And if they're a powerplays, that's almost like an equalizing question that the chair, the host of the room will just gently encourage people having just have a chat to each other about this question and a little bit of loose structure and it sets up the connection so that you just almost in gently sit down that gets rid of that awkward. Can everyone please be seated and standing around and looking at each other? So on arrival question, when you turn up and I could talk more about how to set up the room, but I might be getting into too much detail as well. They worked really well for this board. And one of them said that was great. We're going to do that for every board meeting.

Helga Svendsen 8:05

But I recently did a wellbeing at work certificate and as part of that I did a project around well being in the boardroom and my go to question now for starting meetings is what's something that made you smile this week? And we go around the room. But one of the boards that I chair, we go around the room, which is the board members and the staff, what's something that made you smile this week? Which is, I think, one of those engagement questions maybe, and puts people in that positive state of emotions around well being as well. So having whatever you go to opening engagement question is, I love it.

Jacinta Cubis 10:24

Yeah. And I actually, I used that with one of the universities, I think recently with some academics, they even did it. I said, Can you pick a photo of something that made you smile this week? So that's also another way because then it's almost once removed, because sometimes people still live in

struggle. So I don't know my mind's gone blank. But if you say pick a photo, it makes it even a little bit easier if you've got the time. But yeah, great question, Helga, great question.

Helga Svendsen 10:49

So unless there's other tips around those engagement, and that engagement stuff, let's move to the setup of the room. That'd be great. Like, talk to us about what's important there?

Jacinta Cubis 10:58

Well, I was thinking about what could I possibly share with a board that would be useful? And I can't tell you how many times I've turned up to board meetings, and I just groaned, you know, like, how heavy is that board table? It actually represents such an immovable thing, doesn't it? I don't know, if you feel like that. Why board meetings are held in boardrooms? What is that? Anyway, that's another story like, but so if the furniture is flexible, how flexible is it, can you actually get rid of it and then often turn up and there's a U shape. And I still get just tables and chairs. So with this board that the same board I was talking about before sort of induction sort of check in bit of a sprinkling of their strategic plan, or peak body, it was associated with health in the middle of COVID. So you know, everyone was a bit stressed, a circle of chairs, no tables, or circle of chairs, in the other part of the bigger room, little clumps of chairs, okay, if you have to have a table in it small group. So what you get there is collective space for conversation, workspace, and you physically move and in that physical movement, what a great way to separate the cliques, what a great way to be strategic about who you sit with whom. And you can do all sorts of ways to do that, that have fun, but even in that collective space, okay, so they get their arrival question that already feeling a bit comfortable, I make sure I have a coat rack for them. So they don't nest, I don't grab their own little space with all their bags and overcoats. And even in that circle, the Secretary of the Department did his update. So it doesn't have to be you can still have a formal thing with a great discussion. And it actually makes everyone a little bit more vulnerable. I always say something like, Don't worry, there's no guitar, there's no we're not going to sing in within a few minutes, people are comfortable. And I think it's really important to have a circle if you can at the start to connect to just shift that this might be a little bit different. And maybe not every board meeting, but just particularly if you're doing blue sky staff visioning. Or maybe you've got some sort of fairly controversial topic that needs a deep dive where you might have collective thinking connecting on it. What does it mean to us? Whose perspectives are we missing? Go over and do the work, put your heads down, do the work over here. So I know this seems ridiculous. But the venue recci, checking out the room, you get this whole you're you're a facilitator is so important. And if they told me we've got small tables, it happened the other day, I walked in there waiting tables, you can't lean across, you've got this coming up at your dinner and you can't lean across the table and talk to 10 people. So I get rid of them if I can. So I think might be hit on room set up. And look, it really does work because people don't take their usual seats. And your last podcast about our two previous about power dynamics. If it's always in the same room, people always state that and you'll get the peanut gallery. I'm sure most boards don't have peanut galleries, but there'll be someone throwing in a hand grenade. If there seated, maybe

there'll be less likely to throw that hand grenade. Anyway, that's a few thoughts about room setup before you even get in the room.

Helga Svendsen 14:03

So I'm wondering for this group that you were working with, was it a workshop? Was it a board workshop? Or was it a board meeting? Because I'm thinking likewise, I'm loving all of what you're saying. It's exactly what I do in board workshops. But I haven't had a board. Like that's been where I'm the facilitator. It's not been where I've the chair of the board. And I imagine that some chairs, listening to this go, Oh, my God, there's no way I'm going to do this in a board meeting, I'm guessing is what some of the people listening to this might be thinking, even though we know that using some of these techniques gets to better thinking.

Jacinta Cubis 14:37

It's a really good point. And recently, I worked with a board in Sydney national board and it was to help them have more effective meetings, but it was a workshop. So interesting. And I do take your point, but I guess adapt for what is relevant for you. So I'd invite a chair to just maybe not become complacent my message would be not to become complacent about where you sit more Your board meetings look like, can I rearrange the seating? Can I rearrange where people sit? Okay, don't change the furniture. Just what can I shift about this particular meeting that just might make it feel a bit different? And even if it means before we sit down at the table with your cuppas just come over here and just have a chat to each other? Let's just find out one other person. What made you smile this week? Your question, as you're walking in something like that. But for board meetings in particular, it was interesting with this group in Sydney for more effective meetings, we did move rooms, and I threw a question at them, which is a great question I've got from the company director, I loved it, Michael Cameron who's the Chair of Heritage Mutual, he said at the end of every fairly in depth discussion, he asks, What would a member say if they just heard that discussion? And what would they think of that decision or the outcome we reached, and they document the commentary so Michael Cameron said that and I use that with the board, in pairs, they had such a difference of opinion, it lent itself facilitator mode to a fishbowl, which means two people sitting opposite each other in a chair, in chairs, just literally debating different perspectives, and the other board members stand around, they found that incredibly useful. And the physical move to just two chairs at the front of the room, tells you Oh, we're gonna have a deep dive. And it only took another 10 minutes. And I think you can do that in a meeting. Now, if you can't move, I guess it's just getting your head around. What can I do differently? And at the board table, if you're, it's a meeting, you've got a packed agenda, just to think about this is chairs as facilitators, facilitators as chairs, how do I chair a meeting? And I've got four types, do I chair bit like a guide, am I a bit of a dictator, do I need to be a referee, or, if I'm brand new, or quite young, or I'm in an industry I don't know, am I trying to be a bit of a crowd pleaser? So how am I chairing this meeting? What's my usual style? Where am I most comfortable? Why? Where am I uncomfortable? Why and what might be needed for my group. So don't lose the table. Don't change the way you do a meeting, the only thing that you do is just reflect on what am I like as a chair. And I've just got four types. There's probably 15. But I'm very simple, I

can only keep four in my head. And with the group that I was working with in Sydney, originally the I came through the President's day job, and their chairs are not being referee enough. The conversations are so collegiate, that no work gets done, and no decisions are made. And I did post about this in your Facebook group. We did a little poll that was quite interesting. And some of the responses were sounds like it's not a very good agenda sounds like this. But it really is down to the chair, because 75% of us have never been taught how to run a meeting that comes from Professor Stephen row Goldberg, who wrote the book The surprising science of meetings. So by the time we get to chair, if we've learned from someone good, lucky us if we've seen good modeling Lucky us if we have a natural ability, lucky us. But by the time we get to chair or even chair of a committee, maybe we think it's too late to ask for help. Or to get tips. We're supposed to know that. That one thing you can do is reflect on Well, how am I chairing this? What do I need to do to elicit the quieter voices? How do I shut up the loud voices? How do I shift it? So we don't just have the usual go around the table. As Michael Cameron says, I don't need to hear from every director. I don't. And those are all facilitation skills, scratch out facilitation and just put chair, it's a game sort of thing.

Helga Svendsen 18:55

I'm reflecting actually on your four types of facilitator and chairs reflecting on what am i I'm actually also thinking that that in that there might be the role for the different sorts of facilitator slash chair archetypes, I guess, at different parts of the meeting. If you're doing the housekeeping stuff at the start and the for information, you don't need, presumably to be the guide that I'm assuming as a more facilitative kind of role, you might be a bit more dictator. Let's just get it through. And then when you're at the let's have discussion about these things, that might be a different role. So you might even take on the different archetypes at different parts of the meeting. Would that make sense?

Jacinta Cubis 19:33

I think so. And that really was brought home to me when the chair of the board in Sydney in her day job was saying that when I showed her before she said we need more dictators. We need more referees. You didn't mean literally like dictators, referees, but that behavior to just wind up the discussion to synthesise where we've landed, not necessarily to vote and make the call but to bring it to an end, and restate. I know this sounds so simple, but to restate our agreement and the action, so that it can be communicated clearly to whoever it is you're reporting to your shareholders, your community, your members, your staff, the ASX, whatever. But one of the complaints I get from the staff in who get the information back from the board is what did they decide? How do I communicate that and the waste of time where they have to go back to the company secretary or, and clarify, why isn't it clear? If that is quite referee type of behavior? I'm going to call it now almost like blowing the whistle. When do you blow your metaphorical whistle? When do you wind it up? And I think you have to put a foot the reality is it at our best we're like a guide but the reality is, we probably have a foot in all camps. So a dictator is not bad, the referee is not bad. It's which had him are wearing now which ones needed. Now. I think crowd pleaser behavior, for example, is that, and I've seen it happen, and I've helped a change. We did a scenario. Here's the issue. What do you all

think? Oh, my God, like, what do you all think over to you? Plenary discussion - okay, depending on the culture of your board, that might be good. I don't know what you think Helga. But let's say it's mostly new board, let's say the chairs quite new. That's just going to result in a cacophony of the loudest voices, or the most powerful, or the expert will speak. And we'll miss out on the person who maybe doesn't have the technical expertise, but has a wonderful perspective on the end user, for example. So then we shifted it to instead of saying, What do you all think? Actually, she could still say that, but give them... a just take 30 seconds to jot down on your own 30 seconds. So Okay, we're back to a board meeting. This is not in a workshop style. But everyone can do this. I've seen chairs do this, go from? What do you all think? Cacophony. Usual Suspects? What do you all think, take 30 seconds to write it down. And then we use the speaking clock, which I can give you a link to a video on how to use it, which gives a really simple structure where everyone has a turn, people know their turns are coming up. And if you've got nothing to add, you just say pass. You don't have to use it every time but they are relying on it at the moment like it's given them a little bit of structure. What's really important about that, if it's not obvious is every now and then can you just give people 30 seconds to reflect on their own? So yes, it's a plenary discussion. Yes, it's a board and it's collective. But they're all individuals with individual contributions to make. So solo to pair to group that can happen in a meeting, you've got more than four people, you need a facilitator. And that's a good question to ask, too, is the chair doesn't actually have to facilitate all the time, who's going to facilitate this discussion, allocate a facilitator for it, to build capacity and capability across the board, perhaps

Helga Svendsen 23:09

It's so interesting, because board meetings, we picture what they're like, they must be like this. I mean, who says they must be the big table in the middle of the chair sitting at the end? Even where the chair sits? Do they have to sit at the end of the table? Can they sit in the middle of the table, board meetings don't have to be in that very traditional kind of way that they are done, there's no rule that says it has to be done that way. So we can do them in whatever way we like. And whatever way brings about the best thinking. Because that's the key for a board.

Jacinta Cubis 23:36

And I think that best thinking what's going to so how do we not get stuck in a rut? How do we avoid complacency? How do we keep ourselves fresh? The very things that that board is asking of their company or their not for profit, or whoever they is not the same old, same old. I handed out paper clips, to board members at one of these how to have effective meeting workshops, because you're only allowed to use three paper clips to speak. And it was quite funny. One of them got a bulldog clip. So look, it was just to illustrate, how often am I speaking? And also Oscar Trimboli, who I'm sure you know, often. What is the best tip for listening? I asked every board member they gave me all sorts of things. None of them said breathing. Breathing is the best tip for listening, according to Oscar Trimboli based on research rather than jumping in all of that sort of stuff. So there's a lot you can do around the same table with your Board Papers. It doesn't have to be a circle and work tables.

That's wonderful. But you can metaphorically shift things up by just ask them to reflect on their own, share and appear and then move to groups.

Helga Svendsen 24:46

Before we get to summarizing what is this talking clock of which you speak explain what that is for us aswell. Tell us about that because I'm like hang on a minute. We can't just let that go by without knowing what it is.

Jacinta Cubis 24:59

I'll give you the link into a video where I explain it. And anyone who watches the video, I show you how to do it, you just draw a circle 12, 6, 3, 9 and then fill in all the other numbers for however many people around the table, it works ideally with about 12. So if you've got 20 people on a board, it might be too much, but who's got 20 people on the board? I hope not. And you literally, you can go clockwise, and you can go anti clockwise, and you can start at any number. And you can ask people to time themselves. So it's a speaking order. But instead of just writing a list of names, if people have to draw the circle on a bit of paper, they've got bored papers, draw a circle, you draw it on a whiteboard, they copy you, it keeps him engaged. They know they have to say the name of the person after them, they have to keep listening. So online, it's really good. And I first learned it from Candice whose surname escapes me but from the thinking field, and I put that reference in my video as well. And it's just been gold really good. So I'll share that link. You can anyone can watch a video and, and boards find it helpful. Again, not every conversation. But every now and then it's a different way to allocate speaking order, and give a bit of gentle structure to make sure you balanced the quiet and loud voices in groups.

Helga Svendsen 26:15

It's tools in the toolkit, right? Like you don't have to use them all the time. But the way the inverted commas, traditional board meetings are run. That's just a different tool. And we don't just only have to use that tool, we can use different tools as well. Just enter so much gold in here. What are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Jacinta Cubis 26:35

Oh, I feel like I, I hope I haven't bamboozled people too much with tools. But my key points to zoom out is to zoom out in a board meeting. How am I charing, how am I facilitating, chairing the conversation? What's needed now? How do I hear from the quieter people without embarrassing them and drawing on their name? I think there's a magic number of four, just two. If there's four types of chair, guide, dictator, referee and crowdpleaser, and we are all for in one meeting. There's also four things to remember about a board meeting and your previous podcast guests have talked

about purpose, purpose, purpose. So it's why why are we meeting? And why this item? Not just the meeting? Why this item? Why is it on the agenda? Do we all have a shared sense of purpose around that you can do a really quick check around that in many ways. So why and who's coming in? Who are their interests like the guests that is coming in? But also who are we meeting for that beautiful question, the one question, what would a member staff member community members shareholder, whatever say about the discussion that we just had? And what would they think of the outcomes? Why who where are we headed? And what will we do? So I always get asked for the what, like, how can we make our meetings more interesting? And I still go back to the why are you meeting? Why is this item on the agenda? And one of your other podcast guests emphasize that too, so why, who where and what? And the floorsome foursome, so for seems to be a bit of a magic number. And Michael Cameron's question, just great. I can't tell you how many tips I get from the company director, every time I work with a board. And what am I like as a chair, what am I like as a chair? How is that affecting the outcome? Outcomes of my board meetings or our board meetings? And the pulse check. So if board meetings, what could be better about my board meetings, our board meetings? Do we ever check in on that once a quarter? Once a year? How are our board meetings going? If our board meetings we're moving? What might it be? If our board meetings were a song? What might they be? Or pick a photo that are a metaphor? If you're being serious, you know, just pick a metaphor, because every board member around that room will have a different metaphor? And what conversations might that generate? To keep a pulse check on how effective our meetings are being and how they could be even better? Wow, there's a few takeaways there.

Helga Svendsen 28:59

Yeah, there absolutely is. And in fact, even those questions there about if our board meetings were movie, if our board meetings were a song, I'm just like, oh, I might add those to board reviews that I do as well. It might be interesting.

Jacinta Cubis 29:10

So good. Yeah. Because you never know what conversations there might generate.

Helga Svendsen 29:14

Exactly. Now we've already got the talking clock. But is there a resource or another resource that you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Jacinta Cubis 29:22

If you are a curious chair, and you know, the only thing you can control at a board meeting really is yourself really is. So if you're interested in self awareness, I've done a short guide called The (F)awesome Facilitator. I have not updated it to replace the word facilitator with chair, but I reckon

you could just cross out the word facilitator and there's some thoughtful questions in that short guide that might be useful for yourself. Might be useful for an upcoming committee chair, or you're looking five years down the track for a potential chair. And it might be useful for the board there'll be one or two questions in there that, I think, you know, grab a cup of tea takes that long to read and encourage people to read that.

Helga Svendsen 30:05

All right? Well, we'll make sure there's a link to that in the show notes. And folks, if you're listening to this podcast, like I often do when I'm out walking, and you're like, well, that's great that it's in the show notes, but I'm out walking, how am I going to look for it? Make sure you just look at the website because all of the links will be there as well. Jacinta thank you so much for all of these tips for people. I think it will prompt some thinking for some chairs and maybe also for other board directors as well, because folks, you can better lead some of this engagement as well in the boardroom. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today. Thanks for having me.

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