



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 322

# Transcript – Episode 322: Professional development for board directors mini series – Jennifer Duncan on the virtues of the Governance for Social Impact program.

**Helga Svendsen:** Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Jennifer Duncan, and we'll be talking about the Governance for Social Impact program. This is part of a miniseries that I'm doing about director development. So, or we'll be covering off on the company directors course, the Institute of Community Directors Program, the Board Mastery Program, governing for purpose.

Governance for Social Impact, the Governance Institute of Australia program. How often can I say governance in an introduction and some options from New Zealand as well. So folks, before we start the conversation today, I would just like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet.

For me, I am on the unseated lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. I would also like to 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 Jennifer. Jennifer is on the boards of Focus one Health Foundation South Australia, and she's also a member of the South Australia Northern Territory Council for the Governance Institute of Australia.

She has a long list of former boards. Let me just list some of them. So the South Australian Council of Social Service, the Australian Youth Affairs Council, justice Reinvestment SA, the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia. The South Australian Health and Community Service Skills Board, and the Australian Red Cross, south Australian Division.

Jennifer owns and runs a business called Uncommon Good. This business provides consultancy and ongoing support to philanthropic foundations and not-for-profit organisations, predominantly in South Australia. And she focuses on strategy, design, and implementation. Her work is informed by almost 20 years in leadership roles within the for-

purpose sector and her passionate commitment to leaving this world a better place than she founded.

So Jennifer, welcome back to the Take on Board podcast.

**Jennifer Duncan:** Thank you. Helga. And I'd also like to acknowledge that I'm here in Tarntanya, Adelaide and I'm on the lands of the Kurna people, and I'd also like to acknowledge elders past and present. Thank you.

**Helga Svendsen:** It is awesome to have you here today. Coming from Kurna country.

So in fact, I'm, I'm wondering last time that I had you on the podcast actually, what was that topic last time, Jennifer? I can't recall. It was a long time ago. Imposter syndrome was a big part of what we were talking about. There you go. It was one of those in-person conversations on the couch in my lounge room.

That's right. Are you in the same house now as when we recorded that last? I am. I'm a room over. Ah, there you go. Love it. Okay, well, I feel like I'm settling in to the conversation on the couch, even though I'm, as I said earlier on, we're country and you're on Kurna country, but we will just pretend for the moment that we're on the couch,

**Jennifer Duncan:** the metaphorical couch.

**Helga Svendsen:** Exactly. So Jennifer, before we dig into the Governance for Social Impact program, which I'm very keen to hear about, but before we go there, as always, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me what was young Jennifer like and when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom?

**Jennifer Duncan:** So young, Jennifer, a little bit like Jennifer today was very. Purpose driven, very values driven and very much interested in, I guess, tackling what I see as being the social issues, social problems of the world. And similar to what you said in your intro, it's very keen to be a person who left the world a better place than she found it.

Uh, don't think young Jennifer ever had any idea that she'd end up. Boardroom, but that's where purpose and our evolution of purpose over life is so interesting. We start with a sense of the impact that we want to have in the world, and then we learn more about ourselves and our skills and our aptitudes, and those also lead us, you know, this kind of a beautiful convergence of purpose.

And it turns out that my skills and aptitudes led me to the boardroom as a place where I would try to have the kind of impact that I've always wanted to have.

**Helga Svendsen:** It's actually a beautiful segue. Now you did the Governance for Social Impact program, which I'm guessing focuses a little bit on, ooh, I don't know, social impact and governance, I guess.

And as I said at the top of the episode, this is a mini-series about all of the different options of professional development for board directors. So I'm wondering, can you give us maybe

just some of the nuts and bolts to start with? What was the format of the course? What was the content of the course?

**Jennifer Duncan:** So I did the course last year, 2024. It's a three-week course, though very easily. Could have been a six-week course given all of the content that's in it. It's a course that operates online, so the beauty of that is that you get participants from around the country, and it's a combination of. Reading, there's a lot of very deep reading.

There's a huge amount of content and your ability to really engage with that, I think goes to your ability to really invest the time in the pre-reading. And then there is largely facilitated discussion and collective learning that leverages off of the content, but also really brings in the expertise and experiences of your other participants.

**Helga Svendsen:** Okay. And are the other participants, is it predominantly people like you who have already got quite a bit of governance experience, or is it people who are seeking to be in the boardroom or a mixture or something different? Again.

**Jennifer Duncan:** Yeah. Interestingly, when you look at the literature around the course, it's very much directed towards directors of not-for-profit organisations, but I would actually say that the bulk of participants were senior leaders within not-for-profit.

Organisations who perhaps will add to it because they report to a board or work directly with a board and are seeking to elevate their understanding of governance concepts that they can bring into their discussions with their board around how to hardwire. That issue of organisational purpose and values into governance discussions.

**Helga Svendsen:** So what's some of the, I don't know, the modules, what does the program cover?

**Jennifer Duncan:** Yeah, so there are three key topics, but lots of topics that sit within them. Again, because of the. The great wealth of content there. So the first session is around systems leadership. So that's a session that's really about encouraging organisations to view themselves in context within the systems and areas of change that they seek to impact.

Consider the role that organisations can play within the system, kind of going beyond. Those sort of funding-based activities and outputs that we really spend a lot of our time thinking about and start moving their thinking towards the social change purpose that our not-for-profit organisations were really created for.

So. Within the course, they refer to this as level three governance. So level one governance based itself around fiduciary responsibility. Level two governance is about organisational performance. And level three governance is about systems impact. So we talk about strategies for supporting organisations to go beyond responding to symptoms.

To start looking at the underlying causes of social issues that the organisation has emerged to address and the role that the organisation can play in pursuing systems change. So it's kind of really more of a sort of holistic way of thinking about organisational mission. And I, you know, I think really consistent with the principle that all not-for-profits should be

working towards, which is that we should be working towards our redundancy because we're solving problems rather than just mitigating them.

**Helga Svendsen:** Oh, wouldn't that be awesome? I, again, I've told this story in fact, even possibly in our previous conversation, but I was formed my first, well, depending on how you count it, my first board was the YWCA and our purpose was to improve the lives of women by ending inequality. I cannot wait for the day that the YWCA is out of business because we have true gender equality.

That would be awesome. Been around for more than a hundred years and probably not quite there yet, but like, like you say, would love that day. So I love that this is, this program is around that in a way. I love it. Okay. What were some of the things that stood out for you? What were some of the things that got you thinking about governance differently?

**Jennifer Duncan:** Look, I suppose in many ways, one of the things that I really appreciated about the course. Is that it put a lot of language and models and research around some of the values that brought me to working in not-for-profits in the first place. I think this continual orientation back towards mission and purpose, a lot of the governance courses that exist are around.

Business models that lead to profitability. And whilst I recognise that that's an important framing for not-for-profit organisations, I also think that that framing can sometimes detract or distract us from this issue of purpose. And what are the risks that we should be taking as organisations in pursuit of purpose.

Another topic that was discussed, and this was discussed in the second section, which was the mission led governance section, was around the issue of scale. Scale's a really big topic for all of us in the not-for-profit sector, and there tends to be one particular model of scale that all of those conversations congregate around, which is organisational scale.

But the course offered as some different ways of thinking about scale with an orientation towards scaling impacts and the fact that scaling impact and scaling an organisation are not necessarily kind of. Mutually inclusive concepts that you can scale impact whilst remaining small and potentially niche, depending on what your purpose is.

I also find that very interesting because we have a lot of conversations with the not-for-profit sector about how we scale up, but we have few to no conversations within the sector around how we might responsibly scale down in order to ensure that we're oriented towards our purpose. And then there were also things in the third section, the beneficiary centric leadership section that I really appreciated.

So that was very much around maintaining our orientation. On the interests of beneficiaries, the needs of beneficiaries, the voice of beneficiaries. And for me, that really highlighted the fact that, you know, we often use this people-centric phrase. We use it a lot. We use it to a point that I think that sometimes it becomes.

A meaningless and empty vessel of words because they're the words that we use, but they're not necessarily the words that we live. And this I think, was a section that really

highlighted for me the fact that if you're gonna use that set of words, you really need to embed. That value in all elements of your practice and decision making.

And that does mean that you will come up against external systems and ways of thinking that are incompatible. And the challenge for us as organisations is in how we navigate that to ensure that we have sustainability that we require, if sustainability is what we require in order to deliver. On our purpose rather than.

I guess continually compromise in the face of the external systems and structures and worldviews and pushbacks that we sometimes get,

**Helga Svendsen:** and funding models that often drive us being the first amongst them. Yes, absolutely. Interesting. Okay. Actually I should have asked this earlier. Who runs this program? So this is run by the Centre for Social Impact.

Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about the Centre for Social Impact?

**Jennifer Duncan:** Can I tell you a little bit about the Centre for Social Impact? So Centre for Social Impact operates out of. University of New South Wales, they were the ones that coordinated this course. I know here in South Australia that they also have a group up in Flinders University.

I suspect they might have a group elsewhere, but I'm not entirely sure. I think they've really emerged. Tell me if I'm wrong in this, tell you, 'cause you probably know more about this than me, sort of in the last 10 years, and that's very much about specific. Courses, education development opportunities for those of us that are working in the for purpose.

Purpose-led, purpose-driven space.

**Helga Svendsen:** Yes. And as the name would suggest, focused on impact rather than activity for the sake of activity. Not that, you know, I'm not saying that's what the way the world used to work, but I think there has, over the last probably 10, maybe 20 years, been an increased focus on that impact and models for impact and governing for impact and so on.

I'm wondering in your board practice having done the program, I'm wondering if there's any stories you can share about how it's impacted your practice in the boardroom.

**Jennifer Duncan:** I think it's probably impacted my practice in a couple of different areas. So one of the things that I do in my business is work with not-for-profit organisations, and a lot of that work does sit around governance and strategy.

So these models around. Within the framing that's delivered in the course, defining your end game. Not just having your sense of mission, but having a sense of sort of that longer term point on the horizon that you are working towards in all of the things that you do and what that means for how you define scale within your organisation, or perhaps I should say, the scale that you prioritize within your organisation.

So I have Drift, definitely brought in to discussions that I've had with different not-for-profit boards. This issue of. Purpose, niche and scale. And I've definitely worked with boards that have said, yeah, we're not an organisation that seeks to be large. We seek to be excellent and we seek to spread our impact, but we don't necessarily seek to grow into being something.

Bigger. And so the way we think about our services, the way we design our services, which go to that scaling of impact, but not necessarily scaling of size, has been really interesting. But I'm also connected with other organisations and boards where there is kind of what I would describe as being the real politic.

Of their external environment where scaling organisational size is actually very important to them to be able to continue achieving their purpose. And so thinking within these different models. Choosing models that are appropriate to the organisation, appropriate to the purpose of the organisation, rather than appropriate to sometimes can just be, hmm, an internal human desire to make things bigger.

And better because we see the two as being inextricably linked, as opposed to actually just better.

**Helga Svendsen:** Yes. Sounds like there is a lot of focus on that kind of conscious thinking about is bigger, better? Have we done what we set out to do? What are we actually setting out to do and how are we gonna get along that path?

It sounds like there's some encouragement about conscious thinking about that rather than unconscious.

**Jennifer Duncan:** Yeah, I think that's definitely true, and I think the other area of impact has been around, and I'm not sure that I love the phrase beneficiary cantered, but very much that thinking around. For communities that we purport to be here to serve, and the role and visibility of those communities within our organisations, I still think that they are far too invisible within our organisations and within our organisational structures.

And what we sometimes seek to do perhaps is. Spend and develop and grow our beneficiaries to what we think of as being our needs, which is sometimes just about creating folk who are a little bit more like us rather than really becoming what I sort of talk about as being organisations with permeable borders.

Which are really open to the impact of others' views and others' perspectives, and bending ourselves to them rather than bending them to us.

**Helga Svendsen:** Oh, Jennifer, that gives us such a great flavour of this program. Is there any aspect of it that we haven't covered? We should be.

**Jennifer Duncan:** Look, I think the one thing that I would say about the program is that I see it as a plus plus rather than an instead of, so it doesn't seek to go to particularly that level one governance, the fiduciary duties.

How do you read? Financial reports, compliance, all of those things that sort of sit on the monitoring and accountability side of the board's ledger. This is very much about strategy. It's about policy, and it's about how you incorporate in the strongest, most hardwired way. Your understanding of organisational mission and purpose within those, really how do you develop mission and strategy that constantly supports purpose?

Recognizing that financial goals, which we often see as being the premier goals of organisations, are actually what I would call supplementary or facilitative goals. Their goals that we should have, only to the extent that they support our purpose. If they don't support our purpose, then we need to be thinking differently about how we go about our work.

So it is not something that replaces the A ICD course or the courses that are delivered by the Governance Institute of Australia, but they're very much a very valuable value add layer that I really encourage for purpose leaders to think about putting on top of what they already have.

**Helga Svendsen:** I love it. I love that level one, level two, level three.

Framework, I guess, around, you know, get the basics right if you do your duties, but that is not all there is to being a board director. There's level two organisational performance, and then there's level three about systems impact. And I, in my head, I also put in that level three. I know it's not their framework, but I'll add to it like that.

Self-reflection and self, what you need to do as a director individually to make sure that we have that good performance in the boardroom as well. So

**Jennifer Duncan:** a hundred percent, and actually the beneficiary centric leadership component also touches on the topic of adaptive directorship. Which I think could stand alone as a topic on itself, but I think that that goes to what you've just talked about there.

Helga. Yeah, absolutely. It's like the slice of the pie that's missing from a lot of those other courses. And for anyone who seeks to sit on a not-for-profit board, it's a slice of the pie that's essential. You just can't afford to leave it missing.

**Helga Svendsen:** Yes, I love it. And I think it is sometimes that fiduciary duties part of it is presented as that's what being a board director is.

But I love that it's part of it, but not all of it. Love. Oh, Jennifer, so useful to have this conversation. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

**Jennifer Duncan:** I think for purpose leaders in particular, the thing I'd really like you to take away is just kind of this reminder that purpose-driven means purpose-driven, and that there are risks in running.

Not-for-profit or purpose-driven organisations. And I think the task that falls upon us as board directors is understanding which risks exist and which are the risks that we should be

taking. In fact, which of the risks that we need to be taking, if we really are to remain true to our purpose, we get very driven.

By external factors and funding absolutely sits there at the top of them. Whilst a lot of the conversation within the sector has moved towards outcomes and impact, and to some extent, that language has been adopted by funders. The mechanisms that a lot of funders still use to support our organisations are not oriented towards impact and outcomes.

They're very much oriented towards tasks, activities, widgets, we might call them when we're completing our funding reports. And so. The onus and responsibility really sits in our individual boardrooms to make sure that we are thinking about our organisations not just as ameliorators or mitigators of effects, but that we are reminding ourselves that we represent or we are custodians.

Our time in the board of organisations that were formed for purpose and we must never let go of that sense of purpose. And to use that as our constant orientation and guiding light in every decision that we make

**Helga Svendsen:** now, we will put a link to this program in the show notes. Is there any other res? And in fact, now that I think of it, we'll put a link to my former conversation with you in the show notes as well.

Is there any other resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

**Jennifer Duncan:** I just think there have been some terrific resources developed by the Centre for Social Impact and also Social Ventures Australia has done some very interesting resources that I'm sure we can find online and include.

The links on and the other resource, and this is, I hadn't really thought about this until we were having this conversation. Helga. But the other resource that I would really encourage people to go to before they go to anything else is Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership. Ah, yes. Great. It's such an old school resource, but I think for four purpose leaders, it still remains critical on top of the reading list.

**Helga Svendsen:** Excellent. I will put a link to that in the show notes as well. Oh, Jennifer, thank you. Thank you for answering the call, both teeing up somebody for me for the governance Institute program and also this one not stepping up and doing it at rather short notice. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

**Jennifer Duncan:** It's been a super pleasure. Thanks for having me back.

*Transcript by Descript*