

Take on Board

Transcript – Julia Cookson: Board dynamics and the four board personality types



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today I'm gonna take on board Podcast. I'm speaking with Julia Cookson about board dynamics and culture. First, let me tell you about Julia. Julia is on the boards of Connect Health, and she's the chair of Project Respect. She was formerly on the board of Lorne and Community Health. Julia has a portfolio career. Her revenue streams include interim executive roles, advisory work and directorships across government, nonprofits and Community Services. She started her career in human resources and is built out across finance, governance and risk and guiding businesses through complex change. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Julia.

Julia Cookson 0:37

Thank you so much Helga, it's lovely to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:40

It's so awesome to have you. As always, I really want to talk about board dynamics and culture. But first, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Julia, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Julia Cookson 0:55

I can, I was asked that quite recently, I was asked what my earliest memory was. And it was so interesting, because it shows a real pattern I was around two and I remember being in my parents veggie garden, and it was summer, I think. And I can remember being absolutely captivated by the white cabbage butterflies that were you know, scooting around. And I'm interested that butterflies are actually in my website and my logo. And I think I use them to represent the growth phases in the business, you know, transition and transformation and development that metamorphosis. Because all my work is about change, and metamorphosis. So sort of, I guess, maybe they followed me all through my life. It's about taking people on a progressive journey to a new future. I wondered whether that was a coincidence. But my first memory, I think, is about being curious, which turns

into a talent for, you know, transition and growth. And I wouldn't have known that unless I'd been asked that question last week.

Helga Svendsen 2:03

What a fantastic question. What was what was the context in which you were asked that question just out of interest?

Julia Cookson 2:09

Well, it was funny, because I was introduced to this woman who is doing some work in a completely interesting area of somatic experience. And I hadn't met her before. And and that was her first question. She asked me, I thought, Oh, this is a good one.

Helga Svendsen 2:26

So interesting. And yeah, I love that. So the butterfly, change, metamorphosis, curiosity,

Julia Cookson 2:35

Development, you know, going through development phases,

Helga Svendsen 2:38

Fantastic. Oh, I'm gonna have to ponder that what my earliest memory is as well. It's not coming to me clearly what what it was, I'll have to ponder that a little bit. Oh, interesting. Thank you. Okay, well, then, you know, let's use some of that curiosity and interest in change, and metamorphosis. Thinking about board dynamics and board culture. So you're the chair of Project respect, actually, maybe first, tell us what project respect is. And then maybe, as the chair, tell us, what your role is, and what you've done in building that board culture.

Julia Cookson 3:14

That's really good, because I think project respect, has gone through its own development phases. It's about 25 years old. Now. As an organization, it provides support services to women who are in the sex industry. So sex workers, the focus is moving towards women who find themselves trafficked, or in modern slavery, and, and so they are the most vulnerable, they are largely called workers, not necessarily but largely are, and may have questionable visa status, homeless, financial difficulties, health problems, and they can't access our systems that well. So we're the sort of, I

guess, the one stop shop, to triage them into other support services. And we do a lot of research as well on this area. So it's a small organization, and I was appointed as their incoming chair last November, I think, November 2021.

Helga Svendsen 4:22

Mm hmm. Congratulations. Thank you. Were you on the board previously? The board as the chair, Oh, interesting. Okay. Talk me through that.

Julia Cookson 4:30

No, not at all. And I was introduced to the organization and this is how it happens, isn't it you know, someone who knows someone who introduces you in. So we went through a whole interview process and their former chair was stepping away to do other things. So the directors were largely an established group already. There were two new directors and then me as the chair and at the time, we had a fantastic interim CEO Liz Billings, who was holding the fourth through lock downs, you know, really good operator in that space. But we needed to find a new CEO too. So me as the Chair in our CEO, Carolyn is new.

Helga Svendsen 5:11

Okay. So it's interesting the organization's I've chaired, I've always come in as the new chair as well. And it's always fascinating for me. You know, you walk in, you sit in your first board meeting, you're like, God, I haven't been to one of these board meetings before. I wonder how they operate? Oh, well, let's just get on with it and do it, how I think I would normally do it. So tell me, what was your experience of that. And, you know, if we're thinking about culture, in the boardroom, you're new to the culture. So you're learning the culture at the same time as you're kind of guiding, I guess, for want of a better word. So talk me through what happened there?

Julia Cookson 5:44

Well, look, I think I can draw back on my experience of chairing inside organizations as a as an executive, you know, that's where you cut teeth. And then I've had, I'm gonna say for years chairing Finance and Audit for Connect Health, and I've been really lucky there, because it's a very well governed community health business. So you get to see people in action. And it's, it's a good way of learning. So me having a background in human resources and culture and change helps as well, because you really attuned to the nuances and everybody's way of operating. And so I'm quite used to dealing with new group dynamics and being an interim exec term fairly used to going into somewhere that's new and novel and having to hit the ground running and build rapport quite fast and get a track record going fast. So, you know, it didn't faze me. And it was actually quite nice just to, to meet them in a through the recruitment process, because everybody on the board actually

met with me, it was a long process. So by the time we had the first meeting, we were all sort of known quantities, even though we'd never, I still haven't physically met some of them. Either. We've, we've tried, we've tried multiple times. But you know, we haven't all physically met. Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 7:12

That's the world we live in now. So it's building relationships virtually.

Julia Cookson 7:16

Okay. Right. But to me, it's been really important to get that right balance between the skills on the board and the sort of interpersonal chemistry that are getting that, right, it's really vital. So you know, let's not talk about culture in the board so much as the chemistry in the board, because that actually shapes the style and time for me the first step in getting myself established, and also the new directors and was to get them into the field as soon as possible so that they understood what Project Respect was, because we're all professional women, in the largely in, in commerce, and none of us have had really direct experience with sex work, or one has, but not as a worker herself. So, you know, for us, it's actually really been important to get in the field as soon as possible. And so, between lockdowns, the directors got together with the staff, and some clients and we've got an advisory group. And we had a shared discussion about their experiences through COVID, we have to be really careful, because some people, some of our clients, you know, quite reticent about having their faces available to us. So it was so successful. And we looked at everything from their angle. So working in sex workers through that time, I mean, the issues that they had were largely around money, housing, health, visa status, so on, a lot of our international students that didn't have access to any financial support, were forced into doing sex work, which was devastating for me, because some of them were about the age of my daughter, that was criminal that we just don't provide support in a sufficient way. So that gets on to the next topic I wanted to raise with you. I was shocked when I got in there to learn that this is a billion dollar industry in Australia. So let's not kid ourselves that it happens overseas. It happens here. And we've got huge numbers of trafficking, and modern slavery Act, it requires commerce to find or eradicate slavery from the supply chain. But if you do find it, there's no funding for anybody that's caught up in that there's no support services necessarily. So it's just it's a it's a totally missing gap in our area, you know, for our clients, is completely missing from the state and the national family violence plans, which the policy developers had no idea about until we raised them last year, and doing a bit of a scramble to, to correct that. So the issue is that was the focus in our sector has been on decriminalization of sex work, which has a very strong health focus. And we've got some powerful lobby groups within the sector who want to ensure that sex workers a legitimized Proficient, which is fine, they can, but that's not our client group, our client group are actually sex workers who don't want to be or if they do choose to be in the end, have to have their particular needs met in a way that other support services don't. So yeah, it was, it was really important to to meet them, and see the scale of the issues that we're facing them, and how project respects work supports them, and how we as a board support and build bonds with our staff and our client group. And that really laid the groundwork, that session, laid the groundwork for our strategic planning day that came about two months later. And

what became really clear was our purpose, our organizational purpose builds chemistry. We're all volunteers. And we're there because we really believe in what the organization does. And we're really passionate about advocating for sex work to be included in the funding models as a specific funding chain. So that's what started the ball rolling. I think next, we were looking at the chemistry is what makes our board greater than each of us individually, because each individual is actually really talented, professional. But alone, we're not we're we're all smart women. But combined, we're actually kicking goals to get this business back into the place that belongs, advocating in a targeted way, especially rebuilding our research into trafficking and modern slavery. So we can actually feed into the policy advice that is given. So I guess, you know, that's meant repositioning project perspective, they've lost its way strategically, because it was chasing the funding rather than deciding that the funding needed to come for, for the specific needs

Helga Svendsen 12:19

Purpose fired funding rather than the other way around. Yeah, yeah.

Julia Cookson 12:23

Yeah. Yeah. And so we're, we're hauling it back on track. As a chair, I think I have a really unique role in creating this chemistry. And it certainly helps to have a strong background in HR. But I do this by utilizing the directors different strengths. So for example, and I've got little labels for this, I liked

Helga Svendsen 12:44

You'd mentioned these earlier. And I would love you to share them because I love them.

Julia Cookson 12:48

Yeah, but I don't know where they come from, I'm sure they're from a model that I've used in the past, I can't remember, I can sort of put them into four categories like The Pioneer, The Guardian Angel, The Drivers and The Integrators. Now, our Deputy Chair is our Pioneer. So she looks for ideas and opportunities to raise funds and connect with other organizations, and create joint funding applications with other providers. So we get that joined up thinking that everybody loves our treasurer is our guardian angel. Patricia brings a lot of rigor in audit to our financial discussions. And then we have our drivers and they're our technical, detailed, direct thinkers. So they want to know what's going on and exactly why. And finally, our integrators and they are the glue that holds us all together. They value the connections between the directors, they act to make sure that we build it in a social time into our year, so that we really get to know each other personally. And that's been amazing. So that chemistry is really our tone at the top. I guess it leads into the dynamic I have now with the new CEO.

Helga Svendsen 13:53

Actually Tell us about that in a moment. I just want to know what are you Julia? Are you a pioneer and integrator guardian angel? Or what was the other one driver driver?

Julia Cookson 14:01

Um, so not a driver? No, I would say I'm a combination of a pioneer and an integrator, but more strongly the integrator. So I look at the issues. And so now who do I know in my network? And who knows who and how am I going to open some doors? And how are we going to go and knock on doors and say, oh, we need some funding for this. Did you know this? So I like to sort of, that's my job. And I guess, given what I do professionally, stock and trade, isn't it? Yeah. Talking myself into things.

Helga Svendsen 14:37

Okay, so you've got, you know, you've built this culture and the team. I love it, of all of the different characters in the boardroom. And you just started by saying that that also influences the relationship that you have with the chair, get the chair with the CEO. Talk me through that.

Julia Cookson 14:54

Well, you know, my role is the chairs to create the atmosphere. And then I think we need in this type of organization, which is about respect and diversity, respectful diversity, actually. So that the CEO knows that the boardroom was a really safe place for her. And that we can be transparent, because that's really critical in this work. We're dealing with some very, really traumatized people and some really difficult situations. So we need to create a safe place, not only for the staff and for the CEO, as well as our clients. So my relationship with our CEO is essential for how the board performs, but also how the organization performs. And I think we have a unique relationship, not just Carolyn and I, I'm not talking about us, but I'm talking about the chair and CEO relationships really unique compared to the relationship with the rest of the board, but it has to be really strongly anchored and mutual trust and respect. And I came into a fully functioning board. As I said, our CEO at the time when I joined was, was Liz Billings, our interim CEO, and she'd done a really excellent job stabilizing us through the rocky period of COVID lock downs and oh my goodness,

Helga Svendsen 16:15

I'm smiling Riley because Liz Billings was the interim CEO of an organization. I was formally on the board as well. YWCA Victoria so yes, I I know the power of Liz Billings.

Julia Cookson 16:27

Yes, she's great. I really loved working with her. And she had, you know, really kept the home fires burning while we were doing COVID lockdowns, brothel outreach in the middle of all of this. And now Yeah. And just, you know, securing the staff and keeping everybody all nice and happy. I mean, she gave the board an opportunity to get some breathing space to secure our wonderful new CEO Carolyn Gowers. So Carolyn has come from family life. And so there's a nice intersection between what we do and what she is used to. But she and I have had to find our groove in build confidence in our new roles quite quickly and in sort of at the same time. So Carolyn, and I talk every week on a Monday night, usually, while we're driving home. And we also talk before each meeting, to run through the detail of what sort of decisions and key points of the discussions are that we want, and how that information is going to be presented. We also talk about who we should be approaching in the federal and state government, we get our target list each week. And we want to focus on our research and because the funding for our community, so we look at, we're going to chase the grant, or are we going to go for, you know, longer term funding stream? Or are we actually going to start getting independent revenue coming through. So these are the things that we Mel around and who, which conferences she wants to go to, and who's going to be there and how we're going to leverage the strengths offset. There's currently nothing much other than decrypt dollars and health related dollars for this area. There's nothing around trafficking, housing, financial crisis, pathways to employment, Child Services route, etc, for our cohort. So that's what we spend our time mulling over. But my style as a chair, is to conduct not direct, I'm not directive, we're looking, you know, we're really as a board looking to reposition, Project respect, there are other providers that do the support services for sex workers who are not traffic really well. So we're the only ones in Australia that do this, which border security, the federal police, the police, you know, they all really value our contribution. It's a shocker, isn't it. But there's only one tiny little organization doing this in Australia. There are other agencies that have a team doing looking at the same thing that we interface with, but only us doing the specialists work. So we're looking to grow our revenue, to add new services. And to do that we all need to look for opportunities on the board, not just the CEO,

Helga Svendsen 19:26

And not just the pioneers.

Julia Cookson 19:30

No, because the pioneers get all excited about everything. It's the it's the drivers that need to hold us back and go Yeah, but how would that work? Interesting. And if we do do that, grant, this is where you know, a guardian angel looks at it and goes but yes, but if we do do that grant, is that going to eradicate other areas of revenue? Yes. So, you know, having those little alternate lenses that everybody looks through that's that's A beautiful thing. It's a really unique experience to I think, to work with an entirely female board. And the dynamic is extremely different. But more I actually can I say, I think that the performance expectations we have of each other and much higher. We

hold each other to a to a higher standard. But the the conversations are a bit more like you might get it. You know, the school fundraiser, downplay it, but it's, you know, how the kids and what are you doing? And you know, how's work and all that sort of the social glue that holds us all together gets discussed, and then we get into the business?

Helga Svendsen 20:49

Yes, my first two boards because it was YWCA Victoria and social housing Victoria, we're both all women boards. And then the third board that I turned up to I'm like, Oh, that's right. Men are allowed to be board directors to obey. I'd kind of I just never been in a boardroom with men as directors, they reported to board, but it was very, yeah, it's an interesting realization.

Julia Cookson 21:09

Yeah, it is. It's, it is quite interesting. I've reported in as an executive to all male boards. Yes. And yeah, it's a bit like an inquisition, sometimes, but houses an inquisition, you know, I don't know, I would say a less direct way. And we get to the devil in the detail really well, but you don't know that you've actually done it?

Helga Svendsen 21:32

Well, I'm interested because your other board. So you're the chair of Project Respect, but you're also on the board of Connect Health? What are your observations about the differences in culture between those two organizations or chemistry? I think you said, What are your observations about that?

Julia Cookson 21:47

Yeah, chemistry? Well, they're very different businesses, in that they are their crossover, their health and social support. So that's what they have in common. Project Respect is tiny, you know, we've got a, you know, less than 12 staff, whereas Connect Health is much, much bigger, I think it's close to 200. We've got the same quality control, clinical safety, governance issues, same funding pools, same everything. So that's not the difference. I think the difference is that it connect health, we have a company secretary who's who's an amazing company, Secretary in terms of keeping everything beautifully flowing work plans, beautifully done minutes, you know, agendas dadada, and is employed to do that. Whereas at Project respect, and we're all volunteers in both places, largely, but the project respect the differences that everybody on the board is working full time as well, they might be consulting in places like EY or PwC, or whatever, they're all professional. So we're time poor. Whereas, and we have to have our meetings out of workouts. So it's at the end of the day, and and sometimes we acknowledge that we are a bit frazzled. And so the meetings have to be kept to a minimum time so we can get decisions done with Connect Health, Finance and Audit. We have to

have in the morning because I need to get to work. But most of the directors are retired, or semi retired, you know, they might do work, but it's at their own discretion and pace. It makes a huge difference in how everybody turns up to the meeting. It connects health. I get teased in tv complaints about Oh, it's too early, you know, eight o'clock. It's too early to start. Yeah, but you know, I'll be going to at least in theory tonight, so Yes, yep. me while I'm fresh. Again, it's

Helga Svendsen 24:04

Interesting. The my first board again, YWCA we met in the evenings, the second board that I was reporting to, I just assumed because it was also a not for profit, you know, are we meet on whatever the 17th of August, I just assumed it would be in the evening and then it's like, Oh, you made during the day? Oh, okay. I just hadn't expected that. Interesting.

Julia Cookson 24:23

And I think also, because we've got a level of professional maturity, if you like on the Kinect health board that we haven't necessarily got on the you know, we're not as old on the project respect board. Not that I'm being agents here. But you've got, you've got the wisdom of hundreds of years of collective experience versus Yeah, the womenfolk. It's just a different experience. And I like being on those two different boards because learnings from one transfer into the other? Exactly, yeah. And it's good to be able to take the discipline from connect health into project respect to life versa, you know, the energy from one end to the other injury.

Helga Svendsen 25:15

Julia, so many interesting stories in there that I think people will be very helpful for people to reflect on when they're thinking about culture in the boardroom, maybe chairing boards, chemistry in the boardroom, the different characters. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Julia Cookson 25:32

Well, if I go back to the start, was the butterflies in curiosity? Let's just do you know, do that nice reading of the story through the curiosity is drives the quality of the conversation. So our there's nothing worse than a mechanical meeting, you know, we just mechanically going through this, this, this, this this, it's good to have space to be curious about what does that mean? And to give people voice to look at and bring their perspective and and also ask questions like, I want to create an atmosphere where people feel safe to be able to ask, well, what does that mean, and you know, especially around financials, a lot of people are not strong on financials, and they feel intimidated to ask because they assume that everybody else knows that better. Yes, so we have a role that we may not all know everything, as well as each other. So let's just ask the questions, because that's how we

share learning. So that's the first thing, I think. The second thing is around growth. So you start at a point. And so project respect is growing and changing. But to get growth, you have to have that trust, you have to have the rapport. You don't have to like everybody, but you have to have a rapport and a working relationship. And then the purpose is the North Star that everybody rotates around. So that helps us check and balance. Okay, is this going to align to our purpose? If we chose this funding? Is this what our client base need? Go back to the client base? Ask them, you know, and then finally, I think it's about having respect and being inclusive. So hearing the voice of the client, hearing the voice of advisory group all the time, yes. And respecting their view, versus hours. And what's interesting is the one thing that we all share in common that would never happen in a mixed or a male board, is that everybody's kids come along to the social gatherings, which is lovely. It's a really nice way to together and have that common denominator.

Helga Svendsen 27:47

We always used to joke when the why women had babies, it's like, oh, here's our youngest member.

Julia Cookson 27:56

Oh, yes. Okay.

Helga Svendsen 27:59

Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community,

Julia Cookson 28:02

There's a book that I would like to share, because I have really enjoyed reading it. There's a consultant that I know, a chap called Paul Gordon. He's the CEO of Catalyze, and he's written this amazing book, I think, called "Hard decisions made easy". Why I like it, is because he talks about how, as a leader, you have to balance all the multitude of opinions, and factors that come into making a decision. So it'll stick without the decision being made based on who talks the loudest, or who's the most dominating in the room. And I actually really love that book. Because how many times you go into a meeting and you you're dominated by the loudest person and the introverts quiet, nobody remembers to ask. And they're sitting there thinking, but there's this, this, this and this, you know, so that book walks its way through a couple of challenges that we all face in making a decision. So that balance between those non financial nuances and then and then numbers to get to the outcome. So I'd recommend that as a read, I'll ask Paul to give me a kickback for the you know.

Helga Svendsen 29:18

Well, look, we'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Julia Cookson 29:22

Because it is, you know, it is worth read. I've really enjoyed it. So I think given that we're talking about boards and decision making,

Helga Svendsen 29:31

Yeah. How decisions made easy. Yeah, that's can't go past that. Yeah.

Julia Cookson 29:37

I, I thought, well, that's actually a really good resource to have.

Helga Svendsen 29:42

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining us here on the take on board podcast. I think the reflections and the stories that you've shared will be of incredible value to people. So yeah, thank you for joining us here today.

Julia Cookson 29:55

Oh, thank you. It's been such a fun day. It's been great meeting you again. In and thanks for you know the opportunity to share my own thoughts