



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 351

Transcript – Julie Lyford explains the benefits of the chair being the board's unifying force

Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Being on a board can be an incredibly valuable, interesting, and exciting experience, yet it can also be lonely, challenging, and let's face it pretty hard. So here at Take on Board, I'll bring you weekly tips, tricks and advice to help you navigate your way onto a board, onto your next board, and to build your governance wisdom.

Now on with the show today on the Take on Board podcast. I'm speaking with Julie Lyford about chairing a board and being the chair as the glue in the board. Before we start the podcast today, I'd 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 elder's past and present.

I'd also like to acknowledge any First Nations people that may be listening or watching the podcast today. I acknowledge their continuing connection 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 Julie. Julie is the chair of WELA, the Women's Environmental Leadership Australia. She's also on the boards of the Green Institute and Gloucester Transitions Incorporated. She was formally on the Boards of Regional Development Australia, Hunter, the Sunrise Project, and various local government boards including Hunter Councils.

A few things about Julie, which I'm sure we will hear more about in a moment. She immigrated to Australia at 18. She's lived in Gloucester for 40 years, which is a wonderful rural community. She's a former registered nurse. She's been a local government counsellor, and she's passionate about climate, social justice, and good governance.

In 2015, she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for work with the community, local government and environmental activity. Welcome to the Take podcast, Julie. Thank you, Helga. It is so awesome to have you here. Now we've heard just a little bit of your background, and before we dig into more of your chairing experience, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about you.

Where were your parents born, and do you know where your ancestors are from? Certainly do both my parents were born in London and um, their parents were born in Durham and Coleville in Leicestershire, um, and the other side in London as well. And prior to that I think France even. But that's really tricky to.

Delve back that far. So you, where were you born? Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings? Tell us a bit about that. Two. I was born in Enfield in Middlesex, which is really close to London, and grew up in a place called Water Abbey till I was about 12. Um, I've two sisters, Wendy and Deb. Uh, they both live in Australia as well, which is wonderful.

Um, and. Yeah, my parents sadly, um, divorced when I was 12 and we moved to Ashford in Kent, uh, then to Margate in Kent. And then I sort of decided that it would be really good for me to migrate to Australia at 18 and see what life was like. In this incredible country. My older sister had already been out here a year and was writing about the beaches and everything else, and it was cold in London and freezing.

And yeah, I just thought life might be just a tad better in Australia. Oh my gosh. And it has been. Yeah. Oh my gosh, at 18, that is such a big move. Incredible. I jumped on the ship, um, migrant ship, the ELs. Have you seen the movie Brooklyn? Um, no. I went to see it with some friends and it, it's beautiful and she leaves island and says goodbye to her mom and sister on the dock and.

It was an exact kind of replica of me in Southampton, and I'm on the deck and saying goodbye to my mom and my sister on the dock, and it was dark and cold. It was December. Um, miserable and it was heartbreaking. The great thing is though, that they both came out as well to join my older sister and I, so we all ended up in this incredible country.

Oh, fantastic. I was going to ask how long it was until you saw your, um, I'm guessing, are you the middle? Yeah. In the family. You're the middle, right. Okay. So how long was it until you saw your mother and your little sister again? Two years and Deborah, four years she went to America to be a nanny and um, I rang mom after six months, did a trip around Australia on an un air conditioned bus, which was interesting.

Um, and I just rang her and said, uh, look, I don't think I'll come home. And she said, great, I'll come out. So she, yeah, she came out and then my younger sister came out. Oh, amazing. Oh, well. Lucky Australia to get the life at family. I think that's very, very lucky. So I always ask people the names of the traditional owners or the first peoples where they grew up.

How does that work in the UK? Tell me about that. Well, it kind of doesn't really, because we're such a mixture of everything else. You know, you've got the Vikings and you've got every e every kind of mix all over the place. But, you know, I'm really proud that I, in, in Gloucester this is, um, the unseated lands of Waray, Burra, PI First Nations communities.

And I've had quite a lot to do with those communities and um, yeah, it's just such a beautiful place and so many precious parts of country. You know, that we need to look after and

respect and value. Yeah. So I, I, yeah, it's, um, a deep honour to kind of be able to be in this place. Mm-hmm. Okay. And how many languages do you speak?

Well, just one. I tried when I first came to Australia, I was a little lonely, so I went to Manly Night School and tried Esperanto and Italian and I, I, I learned enough Italian to ask how much something was. Esperanto went out the window and I did learn a little bit of Mandarin. How much things were, but it's a bit daft asking the question and not understanding the answer.

So yeah, they're, they're not my forte. My husband speaks Spanish, my daughter speaks Spanish. They kind of get, get it, but my brain doesn't work that way. So where do you feel your place or your home is? It's so interesting because. I've been back to the UK several times to see my family, my grandparents, cousins.

I've got a, um, half-sister over there and a stepsister. So I've got, you know, some wonderful connections. Um. I feel my place is here very much so, and when I go back over there to see everybody, it's lovely doing all the, I call it walking my pavements. You know, you walk the pavements, you walked as a kid, and you get that sense of that's where you were and you've kind of immersed in it.

But I can't wait to get back on that plane to get back here. This is home. This is home. Um, the thought of being trapped. But, you know, I mean, London England's great, don't get me wrong, but I just think there's an extraordinary, um, way of life in Australia that every day I wake up and I still feel like I'm on a holiday, you know, 50 years later.

It's been 50, 51 years since I came here. So, um, yeah, I, I feel very, very fortunate that I was able to actually get here. Mm. Yeah. Well we are very fortunate to have you as well. Alright, well look, thank you. It's always so fantastic to dig a little bit deeper about the person that I have in front. You know, it's, and particularly in fact when we're talking about chairing a board, it's so much about the person rather than just heavy inverted commas.

The process. And Julie, as I understand it, you've been described as the glue. Of the board room board in your role as the chair. So I'm wondering if you can tell me a bit more about how that label and how that role plays out for you as the chair. Yeah, it's really interesting as a previous board and um, uh, one of the board directors, um.

She got everybody to do like a personality test and a quadrant, et cetera, et cetera. And my boss was this quadrant out here somewhere, and I was like, I'm not really understanding this, this personality stuff. But, um, the CEO sort of said, I said, oh, I'm not quite sure that what, that's what that means. I feel, you know what he said, look, you, you're the glue.

You, you, you have this overall ability to see and understand. Where most people are coming from and you have a perceptiveness to kind of, not take offense with things, but try and understand where that person's coming from and then do some sort of overall blending, I guess. I mean, I wasn't chair of that board at all.

Um, in fact, I was, I was. Probably one of the, um, lesser active members at the time. Initially when I got on it, I was so, you know, I thought, oh, that's, that was a really interesting

comment. And since then with the WELA board, I mean, everybody's the glue really, because everybody contributes, everybody. Um, but it's almost like, you know, like I love Lego and I love jigsaw puzzles, and it's, it's kind of like you gotta get.

All the pieces, and you can be a bit creative and you can, you can kind of come up with your own sort of, you know, but at the end of the day, it's gotta resemble a cohesive entity and the, so, so it's about bringing people together and it's, and it's never about you. I think that's one really strong thing I learned in local government where I was really struggling in a rural kind of heartland and one of the only females and you know, environmentally da, da da.

Um, and I had a great mentor, uh, the mayor of Hay fellow that I think he's the late Beck Beckwith now, and he said to me at a local government conference, I've not seen a more miserable counsellor in my whole life. And I said, oh. Anyway, I was explaining to him how I was struggling and he said to me, oh, he said, okay, you haven't learned good process yet.

It's not about you and what you are losing. It's about what are the outcomes for the community that are needed, and what is the process you need to learn to get to those outcomes. It's not about you being, you know, denied or, and it was the most profound. It just was just brilliant advice. Um, and led to a, a, a notice of motion I had on the books for 40 Ks around the school.

Um, this is when my kids were little because I was on council when my youngest was two Bronte and I put the notice of motion up that we changed the, um, limits around the school to 40. And they went, no, we're not having it. So I lost to eight one and ring Mick and he'd go, how'd you go this, this board meeting?

And I'd be crying and saying, oh, and he said, well, actually it's not about you. Who did? Who? Who wasn't in the room? You've got three months to work it out. And three months later, the police, the ambulance service, the doctor, the parents, everybody was in the room to say, what happens if a child is hit by a car at 60 or 40?

And it was unanimous. And I, and, and the other thing he said to me is, you need to learn when to be quiet. You need to learn when not to speak. And I was like, oh. And he said, just present it and let everybody else speak for it because the outcome is needed. Not your voice. Voice, and it's just like, it's so liberating when you actually kind of learn that, you know?

Yeah. Wow. The, he, he sounds like a very wise mentor. What? Yes. Fabulous. Yeah. What amazing support, so. I'm wondering how those things now show up for you as the chair. Um, whether it's the process, whether it's getting the right voices in the room, or the right people showing up, or, um, I love that about the silences as well.

How does that show up for you now in your role as chair? I think, I just think it's really important that you, that you, you do a lot of listening, um, and just valuing everybody that's around the table and everybody that. Our board, like the, all the women on our board, including our CEO, including the team, like they are all doing the, the board are all doing incredible things in their own worlds, in their own lives.

And the fact that they turn up and put in and do what they do is just phenomenal. But we also, um, the framework of love, care, and respect, love, kindness, and respect. It can be really issues you. Strong kind of ding sort of opinions and views, but it's done within that framework and it's just so comforting and, um, you know, that you get a good result at the end.

And it might be, you know, I've had to shift a few things in my mind, um, and thinking, Hmm, I'm not so, you know, is that where I really think that should go? Um, but I love the fact that everybody is strong enough in their own way. To contribute and be respected and heard, and we always have a really good outcome.

Uh, there there are, there are never any real disagreements. It's quite, it's quite interesting. Hmm. So I'm interested, love, kindness, and respect is that. I don't know, part of your ground rules almost for the way you operate as well. So how did that come to be? I mean, you just reeled it off then as if, well of course we have love, kindness, and respect, but it didn't happen by magic.

It happened in some way. How did that come about? Yeah, it's interesting whether it was more of an osmosis, but, but a WELA, the WELA team and the founders of WELA, um, you know, Mark Blake, Judy Lambert, um, Karen Alexander, Sue Lewis, all like, I think that the expectation. Has always been there from the start.

And I did the course, the National Leadership Program in 2017. Uh, Lou Duxbury is a real kind of, you know, she's such a giver of love, kindness, and respect. Um, but I, I think that that's the ethos of the organisation and it's kind of just grown into that. And when you say it to some people, they say, oh, that's a bit, you know, that's a bit, you know, and you say, well.

If you're in a relationship, if you're married or you've got children or you know you've got a partner or whatever, do you treat them with love, kindness, and respect? Of course I do. Well, why wouldn't you do that in your workplace? And actually a few people, it's, it's interesting, one person in particular who really struggled with that whole sense of that's not how the corporate world works, or that's not how other boards work, and it's all, you know, aji, bji.

They've left those organisations and they've said, I realized that I was not being treated with love, kindness, and respect, and that's not good enough. So I think it's really powerful and it's powerful for change making. It's powerful for productivity on a board, and it's powerful too in our human relationships.

I don't, I literally don't want to be around people or with an organisation that doesn't treat me in that way. So, itself, itself, um. Healing as well. You know, it's, it's, I think it's said self discovery, finding your true north and that true north is being respected and, and cared for in your whole self. Yeah, so it's, I love it.

So I'm assuming, and maybe I shouldn't assume, I should always ask the question, love, kindness, and respect are the values of the organisation. Are they, you know, yes. But it's so

interesting hearing that it's so strongly. Connected. because you would know often in organisations it's like, oh gosh, what are our values again?

Oh, it's about this, but, or, oh gosh, I can't remember. Or you need an acronym to remember them, or something along those lines. Whereas you are just love, kindness, and respect and this is how it shows up and it's so strong. Um, and it's empowering women. It's empowering women empower in any role. In any role, and the National leadership program really kind of brings this in.

It's empowering women to say, well, if that's what I expect in my workplace and for myself, I will surround myself with people and, and work environments or social environments where that becomes the norm and that's the change making. I think I'm a governance geek, right? I hang out. And talk about boardrooms and governance all the time.

And what I heard in there was, there was some changemaking too for the person who'd been in other sorts of boards and going, Ugh, love, kindness. That's not boardroom behaviour. That's, you know, we're about the hardnosed, I don't know, decision making or whatever. And in fact, there was change making with that person as well about how boards could and should operate in a different way, or organisations where they work.

Yeah. And, and, and they're not happy, but they're not realizing it because they think that's how the world works. And it does, it does. However, there's a point where, and I love this with, with mentoring, you know, and you're talking to with someone and listening, and you can hear sometimes they're unhappy and it's, well, what's going on?

And you go, what's the. What's the ethos of where you work? And often it's missing and then they kind of realize, oh, that's what's making me unhappy. I'm not being respected. It's not kind, and there's no framework that I can expect that I can actually function in emotionally as well as productively professionally.

So Julie, I'm wondering about, you know, I guess the layering of committee work and of board work. You know, as I understand it, your approach to governance is about transparency, it's about ethics, and all of that leads to a great outcome for boards. Is there something you can tell us about? Is there a story you can tell us about how you encourage that?

I guess. The chairing that you do? Oh, look, I initially, um, started a group because of climate change in 1989 with, with my late friend Karen McKinley. She's told me to stop whinging about climate change and do something about it. So we set up that environment group and from, from the outset, I guess my nursing background too is like, things need to be done properly.

Like you don't skip things because that's critical in, in health. Um. So we started this and we, we got it all set up and we had some great secretary experience with others who kind of said, this is the way you do it. And, you know, with your treasury this is, you know, and we were only a little group. And then bit by bit, and then getting onto council on count, I, I found local government really, really instructive.

Um, even though there was the political stuff, I really enjoyed the, um. Process and governance of how you actually get things done through the right channels and, um, with really good people because a lot of people in local government, especially behind the scenes, are just wonderful. They really want to make a difference, I guess then my advocacy around coal and gas and fighting the a GL gas field in Gloucester that we won in 2016, and then the Rocky Hill Coal Mine that we beat in 2019.

My interaction with some of the government departments in state government and federal government was found really wanting from, from my perspective, because the, the absolute kind of railroading that happens through the Minerals Council or the mining industry, um, the changes that happen in those government departments really wouldn't pass the pub test at all from a governance perspective.

And some of the things that were actually said to us when we met with those officials and politicians, um. We're just incredibly appalling and actually did write about it in a book called *The Town that said No to a GL*. Just, you know, where is someone within the department to put a spoke in the wheel to say this is actually not right.

And I guess my strong sense of social justice is if I see something that's wrong, I'll say it, that's wrong and, and, but this is the way you can rectify it or, you know, maybe you need to follow a proper process. But when things are. Wrong because there's no justice in it or it's for other means. And when communities, especially like ours and other communities think they're fighting on the same good governance levels and transparency levels, and they realize they're not, that leads to.

A lot of distress, a great deal of distress, and that's where my passion now comes in. I'm on a Social Impacts Alliance working group. We've actually, um, had a document, um, presented to Parliament November, 2024 in state, state parliament, um, on the impact of communities that this injustice, um, has. Um, so yeah, there's a, there's a twofold thing where, you know, small groups are expected to really, you know, toe the line as they should.

Through all the fair trading, et cetera, et cetera. It's really important. Yet we, we deal with the government departments that are not, um, doing that. And, um, yeah, it's a, it's a very strong focus. Um, and also if you're going to go to those departments, have all the fact-check researched, referenced documents, don't just go there, whinging about something, give it, give them what they cannot refute.

And that's how we won both. Fights because we actually, we actually beat them by doing good governance and good process, and they could not refute a thing. So you look at you was, was that before or after you got the advice about follow the process, get the right voices in the room? Oh, that was way after, way after the follow the process.

Well, I, I was elected to council in 1995. Youngest female councillor. It was, it was fascinating. And um, and I think that advice came through in 1997. Yeah. Ah, okay. Yeah. And then I ended up mayor for two years, so, you know, I kind of did. Were you the youngest mayor as well? Yeah, first female. Been a hundred years because there'd never been one.

And the youngest. Yeah. And I also had a, oh my goodness. Stint as, um, chair from the councils as well. The only female ever. Um, but then I lost the mayor ever. Yeah. Ever. And then I lost the mayoral role. I was asked to do it, but, um, I lost the mayoral role a couple of months later because my councils accused me of being too vocal about the environment and.

The coal and the gas and, and, um, so because that you, you get a, you get, um, elected in house, um, in smaller councils. But it was great because in a way, um, even though it was disappointing, I just got the highest primary vote in the election, you know? In a way, it freed me up to think, well, I know how it works now I know how this all works.

I know how local government, state government, federal government works. I've been there. I've been to Canberra. I know how it works. Now I know how to beat. The gas and the coal by using the process and governance. So yeah, it was good. It was good. It was, look at you go, it was a good thing to lose it. It was So not everything you lose is sad.

It's kind of like No. Um, absolutely. Yeah. It can be an opportunity too. Oh, Julie, gosh, you are a wealth of wisdom. Um, there is so much in here that I think people can take away that What would you say are the key things that people should take away from the conversation that we've had today? Oh gosh. I think believe in yourself.

That's a really hard thing. Get rid of that imposter syndrome and believe in yourself. That's what the National Leadership Program with WELA is so good at. Believe in yourself. And, and make sure you're surrounded by people and it's always a team. I think one of the clear things is it's always a team.

It's never about you. The it's, and if you don't know, ask someone. And like with, with groundswell Gloucester that I chaired for those, both those, um, resource extraction fights, the team around the table, I didn't have a clue half of what they were talking about. But they were brilliant. That's what, that's what one, because they, they had to, one was a journalist who knew how to put it together.

One was a water expert. So it's always about the team. It's never about you. Um, but I think enjoy what you do and what also. Always reach out and ask. I I look at the accelerator program. Helga. That, that I did with you, uh, two years ago now. I think actually really changed some of my direction as chair as well, and I thought, oh, okay.

One thing it really made me realize is that we've got a really good board. And, and organisation. And also that there are some really great things I could integrate into that. So I learned a lot and probably still need to learn a lot more. Um, you never stop learning ever, ever, never stop learning. Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah. Well. Speaking of learning, is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community? Oh, yes. Well, apart from the WELA Impact report, which everybody can look up on, the website was wonderful. Tells you what worked. I actually found this, um, managing Without Profit by Mike Hudson.

I just, I was, I was into every page when I first started on the, on the board because, um, it was just so instructive and just brilliant. So that was a fantastic resource. I'll make sure there is a link to, um, both of those things in the show notes and to the WELA Leadership Program as well, so people can have a look at that program if that's something that they might be interested in.

Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community. I know I've taken a lot away from it and I'm sure that others will too. So thank you so much for being with us today. Thanks Helga. And, and lastly, uh, my favourite poem is Wild Guests by Mary Oliver.

And you do not have to be good. So I just would like to leave everybody with that. Please just read the poem. That's beautiful. All some po. I'm not normally a poetry reader, but I think that is coming in my future. Thanks so much for being with us today. Okay, bye. So that's a wrap for the Take on Board podcast today.

Thank you so much for being here and being part of the Take on Board community. I do this podcast because I love bringing good women and gender diverse people together. So I invite you to join us over in the Take on Board Facebook group, an active group that helps supports and cheer squads each other.

Just search, Take on Board in Facebook to find us. I would also really love it if you could do some of the other well podcast things, share the podcast with someone you know who might get some value from our discussions. Subscribe if you haven't already, and well, I also really love it when people rate and review.

Thanks again for being part of the Take on Board community. Now go and put these tips, tricks, and advice into action so you can be your best in the boardroom.

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