



## Take on Board Podcast – Episode 310

# Transcript – Julie Toma let her passions shape her board career - could this work for you?

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Julie Toma about her journey to the boardroom and maybe some reflections that come along the way there.

Helga Svendsen 0:08

Before we start the podcast today, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me, I am on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. I acknowledge their continuing connections to land, waters, skies, culture and country. And I'd also like to pay my respects to any First Nations, people who may be listening today. I support voice, treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres, Strait Islander peoples, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Helga Svendsen 0:43

Now let me introduce Julie. Julie is on the boards of Western New South Wales Primary Health Network, the RACGP, which is the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, so their foundation, Friendly Pharmacies, Northern Sydney Local Health District Quality Health Care Board Committee, and the Barbara May Foundation.

Helga Svendsen 1:04

She's previously been on the Australian Dental Health Foundation, Jannawi Connections, LiveBetter, and Asthma Australia ACT. She's got loads of board experience. So Julie, as you can no doubt tell from her boards, is passionate about improving the health and wellbeing of people in society. She provides deep expertise regarding business strategy, marketing, customer and employee experience, philanthropy, transformational growth and stakeholder engagement. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Julie.

Julie Toma 1:38

Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:40

It is so great to have you here, and I'm glad that we're finally getting to have this conversation. But as always before, we dig into your journey to the boardroom and some of the lessons that you've learned from that, I'd love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me a bit about your upbringing and the lessons that you learned, what you got up to, and the leading influences on how you thought and what you did?

Julie Toma 2:02

Wow. What an interesting question. I grew up in Tamworth as a child, and I had the opportunity to spend quite a lot of my school holidays with my grandparents, and my Nana and Grandpa are on one side. My grandfather was an incredibly kind, generous, resilient and values-driven man, whom I loved deeply, and my Nana and Grandpa in their living room had photographs of both my auntie, who'd done a science degree, my uncle, who was an architect in the university cap and gown. And I remember as a child thinking I would love Nana and Grandpa to be really proud of me and have my photo up there with them one day, which, of course, ended up happening. And on my other side, my Nana Howitt was an incredibly positive, optimistic person who was also really deeply curious about people in different cultures and always interested in learning. And a couple of years ago, we did strengths profile as an executive leadership team, and it was very, very interesting to kind of unpack in that self reflection process of that all of the things that I'd become that had been grounded in incredible role models as a child, resilience, positivity, achievement, focused, values- driven learner, all of those things that really came full circle back to those early experiences as a child.

Helga Svendsen 3:44

Yeah, that is so interesting, as you were describing, I think your Grandpa, those were the things I noted, being kind and generous and resilient and values driven and of course, they are all such fabulous attributes, I think, for a really strong board member as well, and I can see how they've come out so strongly in your career already.

Julie Toma 4:07

Very much so. And I think when you look for really great boards and really great chairs to work with, I do, I reflect on that, and I think that courage, curiosity and being really interested in other people's perspectives is incredible. And also some of the chairs that I've particularly wanted to emulate really

approach their like gravitas with incredible humility. And that's something that I really, really admire as well.

Helga Svendsen 4:39

Let's dive into the conversation then, because that's all part of it, really. So we're here to talk about your journey to the boardroom, building a board portfolio, and indeed, some of the lessons that you've learned through that journey. Where should we start this story, Julie?

Julie Toma 4:54

Yeah, I think that the interesting place to start this was actually serendipity, really, and I was working in a really big Asia-Pac marketing role with Cochlear and we had two young children, and my husband was offered a role in Canberra, so we moved down there, and I obviously left my role, and so it gave me a little bit more time in what was a very busy, busy life to really reflect and think very intentionally about what I wanted to do in my career for the next 10 and 20 years.

Julie Toma 5:32

And at that point, I was actually invited to a really big fundraising charity dinner, and it really tweaked the idea of potentially picking up some board and committee roles, which I began doing, and when we moved back to Sydney a couple of years later, I continued in my executive career, but aligned with committee and board roles on the side.

Julie Toma 5:58

And my first board role was actually with the Asthma Australia Foundation in the ACT and I absolutely loved it because I'd done an MBA, so the strategic planning, the financial management, the people and culture, the risk management, all of the other things that you do on a board I found really, really interesting, and when I moved back into exec roles and C-suite and beyond, everything that I've learned in board roles has been very, very complimentary, and it's really helped me grow in my executive career. But also now, when I've got a board portfolio that having been on in a senior executive roles and C-suites, I think makes you a better board director, because you know what your CEO and executive are going through. So it's been a very complimentary journey to do both.

Julie Toma 7:00

Time management is really important. And picking boards where you are deeply passionate about the work and the meaning and their purpose and values are really aligned with your own, I think, is

really, really critical. And choosing boards that are where you working with people that you can also learn from and grow in I think is really important.

Helga Svendsen 7:23

Oh, there's so much in there that I already want to dig into. I might draw the thread from the last part that you talked about there, about choosing boards and boards role where you can learn and grow. I'm wondering if there's any stories you can share about where that has happened with you, where you've learned from the board and grown and how that happened. Is there any stories you can share with us there?

Julie Toma 7:46

Yes, so one of my earlier board roles was with the Barbara May Foundation, and our chair was Michael Sharp at the time, and he'd had a very eminent career as one of the senior partners in a really large audit firm and an incredible career and incredible connections. And as part of that, I'd done interviews for a women on boards next generation leaders program, where we interviewed chairs and CEOs from very, very large successful roles and my research project was really about what set successful CEOs apart.

Julie Toma 8:31

And my conversation with Michael and his leadership journey, I found that I learned from him every single day, and I think, his ability, his humility and his interest in other people's perspectives and his experiences that he shared throughout his career, where he would walk around the office to, often very junior, new people that were joining the firm to really connect with and make every single person in that organisation feel really valued and part of the team. And I think he, when he spoke to you, in you that he you had his full attention, and he was very present and listening to you. So I thought he was exceptional as a chair early in my career, to really learn from that's one example, and there are many more.

Helga Svendsen 9:29

Well, actually, just before we go to many more, I just want to dig into that a wee bit, because I'm interested as chair. He walked around the office, he talked to people, he connected now from the exec team side, that is not always a welcome thing for the chair to be doing that sometimes it is and sometimes it's not - that beautiful fine line between the governance role and the operational role plays out differently in all sorts of organisations.

Helga Svendsen 9:56

So I'm just wondering in that organisation where he was connecting and doing all of those beautiful things, if there was any tension maybe around that constructive, well, maybe not even constructive tension, but I'm just wondering how that played out in terms of that line between governance and operations?

Julie Toma 10:16

Yes, it's interesting. The experience I was relating was about earlier in his career, when he was a partner in a large firm, the foundation was a much smaller organisation. However, I think there are some really good reflections from a paper I'm happy to share later from Russell Reynolds about really high performing boards and the behaviours. And in my experience, being connected with the executive team and walking around offices and being out and about with the organisation is a really, really valuable way to pick up on cues around culture and really, building trust, building connection, demonstrating all of those values of inclusiveness, respect, integrity, all of those things that people see when you're walking around an organisation's offices and spending time in the field, I think is actually really important. And I think there is a line between oversight and operations. It's very important not to cross that. And I think the way you communicate through the CEO to the executive team, having that right is really important in a conversation quite early in your relationship about the cadence of communication and the way you communicate is really important, but I think equally so, there's some really good, hard evidence that the board and chair having relationships beyond the CEO with the executives is actually really healthy and really important, but how you do that is equally so.

Helga Svendsen 12:10

So I'd love to know for the board roles that you've had, how have you gone about that? How have you gone about building those relationships with the executive team outside the CEO, is there some stories you can share with us there?

Julie Toma 12:24

Yeah, there's been a couple of boards I've been on in the past where the relationship was very much focused on the CEO. And I think as an incoming board member, it's important to just identify some opportunities to have a quiet conversation with the chair about inviting different members of the executive to come in and present throughout the year.

Julie Toma 12:50

I love hearing from the different operations teams and from people and culture and I think having your CFO attend most board meetings is really important. So I think that's an important part of that, just to set up the cadence of your board agendas for the year that include each executive coming in and talking on their area.

Julie Toma 13:15

It also helps improve board papers, because they get a better understanding of the questions you're asking, what you're really looking for and what you're needing in the conversations and the two way communication.

Julie Toma 13:28

And I also think it can be really lovely to have some of those informal interactions. So for example, a board and executive team dinner at your annual general meeting, or the annual picnic for the organisation to have the board and the chair present to be mingling and meeting people.

Julie Toma 13:52

I think communicating with employees across the organisation can be really valuable, but yes, definitely making sure that the executive team have a really clear line of sight around strategy, the vision that the board have for the future of the organisation, and that strong alignment with reporting on strategy and how they're achieving on that as it lines up to your three - five year plan, and also trust so that they feel comfortable like raising issues early and in a very transparent way before they become a big problem. You really want to hear about things early and creating that environment of trust, respect, integrity, good quality communication, where you're interested in perspectives and you're going to be constructive in your conversation and create really good psychological safety for those conversations, I think, is key, and that happens with conversation and relationship building, which is foundational.

Helga Svendsen 15:05

Yeah, and it's sometimes a bit hard to put your finger on, isn't it, in that conversation and relationship building and building trust, what is the particular thing that's made a difference, you can certainly tell, and in all aspects of Board Papers, in board conversations and so on, when it exists. So in that, it's interesting thinking about I mean, the chair obviously has a role in that as well. There's the chair's role, there's the CEO's role, there's the board as a whole role, and then there's individual directors, making that contribution in that as well. What do you think is important for you as a board

director? How does that show up for you, that maximising psychological safety, maximising that communication and trust and relationship building? How does that show up for you?

Julie Toma 15:54

I think it shows up in the way you interact with the board and the relationships and the mutual respect you have for each other, coming to meetings really prepared, not interrupting others and letting people share their viewpoint, but also being willing to ask the courageous and the questions that maybe people are making assumptions about. And we know from the recent Australian governance summit geopolitical risk AI, there's so much change happening that I think as a... particularly if you're a new member of the board, being willing to really ask some of those questions that might seem obvious is actually really important, because what you're bringing is a really fresh perspective and a fresh set of eyes to an organisation, and you're helping future proof it by making sure that there aren't any surprises that come up and that we're thinking about and preparing and pivoting the organisation to embrace and thrive through change.

Helga Svendsen 17:12

Such a great point. I think I often say to people when they're talking about board roles and oh, I'm just new. I'm just going to sit back and listen for a while, I'm like, you only get one chance at having fresh eyes once you've been there for three to six months or more you don't have fresh eyes anymore. And it's such a golden opportunity for the board to see things through fresh eyes so I love that... ask the questions, and some of them might be inverted commas, dumb questions, that's okay, in amongst the dumb questions, there's likely to be some cracker questions as well. So you don't know until after you've asked which ones are the dumb questions and which ones are the cracker questions. So you've got to ask them all.

Julie Toma 17:56

Yeah. And I think I recall Catherine Livingston at a Macquarie alumni event a little while ago, talking about, asking what's the second right answer to this? So we've come up with a decision and a solution here, but if we looked at this from a totally different perspective and lens, what could another right answer be? And I think testing your assumptions and testing your decision making in that really proactive way, I thought, was a really good tip.

Helga Svendsen 18:30

I like that. What's the second right answer? And you could probably even third right answer and so on. I love that. Thanks. Catherine, thanks, Julie, I might borrow that myself.

Helga Svendsen 18:40

Julie, I want to swing back to something you said right at the outset about purpose and passion and alignment, and for you in building your board portfolio, when I was talking through all of the board roles that you've got, it seems to me there is, there is very clear purpose and passion. I'm wondering how you keep that really front of mind as you're building your board portfolio and indeed, I'm wondering if there's any board roles you've said no to?

Julie Toma 19:11

Yes, I have actually, and the founder and the major partner who was chair were quite misaligned in terms of their direction and I felt walking into that board, it was going to be a very challenging environment. So I chose, and that was a paid role as well, so I actually chose to walk away from that at the time. Still have enormous admiration for what they're doing, but I just thought time and place this is not giving me the right vibe, and my instincts are saying, don't take it.

Julie Toma 19:48

And so I have walked away from roles which I didn't think were right. I think culture and values and purpose alignment is foundational, because it takes time, it takes energy, it takes effort, and you've got to be on your A game as a board director, because every board meeting, you're making decisions that are going to impact this organisation and if you miss something, it can be really serious and your responsibilities as a board director, regardless of how big or small the organisation is, are equally serious.

Julie Toma 20:27

And I also think like I began my career in health care, and I just saw how vulnerable people felt when they came into hospital to have surgery or some treatment and I think genuine compassion and empathy and respect and dignity for people when they're moving in to that environment is so powerful in creating a really compelling value proposition for your service delivery, and that stayed with me and I think I've always looked for executive roles and board roles where I could bring a little bit of that magic to the role in an organisation that's really genuinely helping to improve the health, wellbeing of people, society or the planet, and yeah, so no, I love that.

Julie Toma 21:28

And I'm, I'm passionate about it, and I think you have to be, because you're often doing board meetings that can go quite late in the evening and if you've got a something that's come up, you can be having weekly meetings, sorting things out, so it can be very, very busy. So it's got to be something that you absolutely love and every day, as a board director, I think you need to be

learning and growing and reading and really keeping abreast of what's happening in the economy, what's happening in the landscape, what's changing in regulations, what best practice is, and so to do that, you've got to really love what you do.

Helga Svendsen 21:28

Definitely. I could not agree more it is. Sometimes it's a hard role to stuff into a box and have hard boundaries around the time and effort and learning that is involved. And it's that's, of course, part of what we love about it that's so good to hear.

Helga Svendsen 22:35

I think I heard somebody say once that the board roles you say no to are more important than the board roles you say yes to and it's partly around that alignment, you know, that whole alignment of knowing what you're looking for, which means that then you know what you're not looking for as well. It's not just a board role that's not the aim, the aim is to align it with your own personal values and purpose and so on, so I love that. Thank you.

Helga Svendsen 23:00

I'm going to briefly touch on one other thing, because these conversations always go so wildly quickly. But I'm just wondering what your reflections are around board skills from your journey, what have you observed about the good old board skills matrix and where it's at and where it might be going?

Julie Toma 23:12

I really loved John Mullen's introduction at the governance summit about how ideal boards now really have a third that have that deep industry knowledge and expertise, a third that really brings strong governance credentials in law or finance, etc, and then bring in a third of board directors that can bring a really fresh and different perspective that are going to really help challenge assumptions, ask those really interesting questions, to a completely different lens, and really help future proof organisations that really need to be leaning into some significant change that's happening across many, many sectors at the moment.

Julie Toma 24:04

So I think the areas of AI and digital transformation, I think every single person on the board needs to be comfortable with that, and there's lots of different AI tools that you can just get out there and

start playing with and learning that are actually quite fun to help take away the mystery of it all and there are some really, really good courses out there as well. So I think everyone needs to do that.

Julie Toma 24:34

I think it's great to have some science and data science and my background was science, and then heading up marketing and communications for large organisations and I think bringing that customer lens and that voice of customer and really strong skills around communicating your value proposition as an organisation to all of your different stakeholders, and helping organisations get their marketing and their growth and the diversification of income streams and their sustainability approach right is equally important.

Julie Toma 25:15

So I've been very, very fortunate that I think there's a lot more boards out there looking for people with my background, which has been helpful, but I've definitely seen a pivot away from pure historical accountants / lawyers to much more a breadth and depth of experience, with much greater focus on diversity of background and experience and I think that AI science component is a really valuable one as well.

Helga Svendsen 25:50

Oh, Julie, so much incredible wisdom here. You know we've touched on so much about you know that culture of the boardroom and building trust, on alignment to purpose, on the skills needed for the boardroom. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Julie Toma 26:08

The absolute foundations of great boards is being courageous like making the right decisions for the right reason. Integrity is absolutely foundational, and trust. So the investing in building really good relationships with fellow board members, with the CEO, with the executives, so you can have those difficult conversations when they need to be had in a really, in a psychologically safe environment, and I think they're the really critical ones, and making sure that you're bringing that really diversity of thinking to a board, I think are absolutely essential are my key takeaways.

Helga Svendsen 26:58

Yeah, great. Thank you. And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Julie Toma 27:05

There are a couple that I'd love to share. One is the Russell Reynolds Global Board Culture and Director Behaviors Study that really highlights real differentiators for those really top performing boards in terms of behaviours and culture and communication and relationships. So that's a really good one. Another one is some fantastic courses that are available on AI and generative AI and cyber etc, which I found really valuable to come up to speed and get a really good introduction into those topics. So happy to share with those with you.

Helga Svendsen 27:46

That'd be great. We will put links to both of those in the shownotes, so folks, you can find it there. I might also add, this is a bit cheeky of me, given it's your conversation, but I will also add to the list of resources, because we've talked about psychological safety, there's a tool called the Psychological Safety Index, which I've recently done my accreditation in, and it measures psychological safety, both in individuals but also in groups. And I'm exploring using it with boards. So I'll put a link to that in the shownotes as well, folks, because you might want to check that out.

Helga Svendsen 28:18

Fantastic, oh Julie, thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your stories and your wisdom with the Take on Board community today. I know I've taken something from it, as I always do with these conversations, and I have no doubt that others in the community will as well. So thank you so much for being here and sharing today.

Julie Toma 28:38

Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

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