

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 228



Transcript – Karen Corr put her hand up and got involved in boards - is it really that easy?

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Karen Corr about her journey to the boardroom and the board's role in stakeholder engagement.

Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me I'm on the unseeded lands for the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present and any First Nations people who may be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. Yes, we've had an unsuccessful referendum in Australia to incorporate The Voice into the Constitution. But regardless, I note that indigenous elders have said that they maintain the vision of the Uluru statement from the heart i to continue to support the Uluru statement from the heart. And I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. I stand in solidarity with First Nations people for reconciliation.

Now, let me introduce Karen. Karen is on the boards of Jumpleads, which is a not for profit organisation and Inglewood and Districts Health Service. She has previously been on the boards of Bendigo Sustainability Group, and Central Victoria and Greenhouse Alliance. Karen is a community development and engagement specialist with extensive experience in communications, promotion and project management across communities, business and creative sectors. Starting her career as an environmental engineer, Karen developed a passion for solving complex problems and involving communities in the implementation of solutions. This led her to undertake various roles in community leadership and social entrepreneurship, including over the last decade shaping and leading Jumpleads NFP and Make a Change Australia. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Karen.

Karen Corr 1:45

Oh, thank you.

Helga Svendsen 1:46

So good to have you here. And whilst I'm keen to explore your journey to the boardroom, and the board's role in stakeholder engagement, as always, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you before we get into it. So tell me what was your earliest experience of governance.

Karen Corr 2:04

So my earliest experience was getting involved in an organizing committee of the Bendigo Sustainability Group before it even had officially become inaugurated. And the day before the official IGM inaugural general meeting, everyone put their hand up to say what role they're going to do when it came to be who's going to be president. And there was dead silence. So me having recently done a bit of leadership training, I was like, Oh, I'll give that a go. So I put my hands up naively and became the very first president of the Bendigo Sustainability Group. But 15 years ago, now think who

Helga Svendsen 2:45

So your first board role, your first chair role? All in one? And indeed, the first governance of even that organisation? Yes.

Karen Corr 2:55

A lot of firsts there, that's for sure.

Helga Svendsen 2:58

Oh, my goodness. So you were involved in the committee before it became like, formally aboard? Were you the chair of that committee?

Karen Corr 3:05

No, no, I just joined the committee, probably two thirds of the way of it being formed. But I've recently moved to Bendigo. And I'd come from a corporate background in my engineering and project management and just done some leadership training. And yeah, it just happened to be good timing. Because I was like, Well, I've done this leadership training, what's the leadership training for? If not to get in there and have a go?

Helga Svendsen 3:29

Oh, that's interesting. So you got to develop the leadership skills that you just been learning about, you got to presumably meet a whole bunch of new people in the community, and exercise it all in a different sector to what you were used to doing?

Karen Corr 3:43

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So I've worked in the environment sector, but in business, not in community. So yeah, it was a big learning curve for me, so I could bring my project management skills. And really, they came together. Well, when it came to bringing in grants and building partnerships with local organisations. They were very useful in that. But then I also learned so much from the perspective of running committees, engaging with community, just being part of a membership organisation was huge.

Helga Svendsen 4:14

Wow. Okay. So if you can cast your mind back to that first, maybe the first year of that, which I think you said was 15 years ago. What can you remember what stood out for you from that first 12 months because you're learning everything in there. You're learning about the new sector, you're learning about a new community, you're learning about governance, you're learning how to chair the meeting, you're learning everything in there. What's something that stood out for you in that period of time when it was all really new?

Karen Corr 4:38

I think the biggest thing actually was learning to be a spokesperson for the organisation. That was huge, because I was so involved in it. And at that time at that small, this the organisation is quite small and growing and emerging. I was very hands on so everyone was doing everything. So we were volunteering our time to run events, get projects up. The ground looks a lot different to being on a board of a larger organisation. But then being the go to person when it came to media or events or media conversations, like at the time, climate change was a big issue, the Kyoto Protocol was being introduced. And there was no other organisation in Bendigo, that was working in the advocacy side of climate change in environment. So we became that go to organisation. So all of a sudden, I had to Yes, step up and learn how to speak on the radio and be that point of contact, which was really, I really enjoyed it, actually.

Helga Svendsen 5:36

Oh, there you go. You're a seasoned media performer doing this podcast is a piece of cake for you.

Karen Corr 5:41

It's been a while actually. So I'm always bit nervous.

Helga Svendsen 5:47

This is just prompted for me, it's like so that was about 15 years ago, I haven't quite done the maths. But I worked at sustainability, Victoria. And we had a program called back way back then called climate communities that I was involved in creating, and I did a lot of the regional engagement about it. Karen, we may well have met 15 years ago, is part of that whole process?

Karen Corr 6:07

I vaguely remember that program?

Helga Svendsen 6:12

All right. So we'll then look, in some ways that is a beautiful segue to the topic of today, because we're talking about your journey to the boardroom. And that is indeed your first kind of governance experience. So well, how long were you? That was Bendigo sustainability group? Right? Yeah. How long? Were you involved in that organisation?

Karen Corr 6:30

Yeah, so I was there for three years. And as the chair, then I stood down, and I was still active as a volunteer, but I actually got a bit burnt out. So it was time for me to step back and give someone else a go. And I think that's healthy for an organisation, especially a growing one to have new energy come into it as well. But then, of course, I didn't just want to stop at Bendigo, I started to look for what else can I get involved in in terms of the sustainability and the environment, because that's a passion of mine as well. So I got involved in the central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance, which is a collaboration of 14 councils across central Victoria will actually at the time, it was councils and businesses and community groups. So I was there as a representative from the Bendigo Sustainability Group on the board. So became part of the board member. And then about after I think a year, they were looking for a chair, and I put my hand up again.

Helga Svendsen 7:25

So while I'm interested in that as well, because I've heard twice, then you put your hand up. What is it? Do you think that maybe helped you to put your hand up? Because it can be a hard thing to do to say, Yeah, I'll take this. What was it that made you do that?

Karen Corr 7:39

Yeah, I think it was just seeing what the gap was thinking about what I can contribute to that gap. So with the Bendigo sustainability group, well, it was that I've done this leadership training, and that people wanted to do things, but they didn't really want to take that leadership approach. So for me, it was also a learning and a practice as well. But there's such Victorian Greenhouse Alliance saw that there was a gap. Again, I guess, in that leadership, having courage to just have a go or still having to learn along the way, obviously, it's probably good to have your full governance training before you take on some of these roles, which I didn't, I just had to keep learning and take on opportunities to learn as I went that also the gap in even like how meetings around like coming from a corporate background, I think we learned very well how to run a good meeting about a project. And I actually found that I could apply that to the board role as well. So that helped.

Helga Svendsen 8:33

What's important in running a good meeting. You've chaired a couple of organisations. Now, what are the lessons that you've learned both prior to being in the chair and being in the chair? How do you run a good meeting?

Karen Corr 8:42

Well, one of the things I always found I'm very action orientated. So I didn't like it when I would sit in a board room, and it was all about a conversation and no clear actions, who's doing what by when. So I would always bring that I think that helps just to give that structure to a meeting. fairly basic, but not everyone does that. So and just being clear on what the intention is like, what are we actually trying to achieve? I think that strategy, I've always enjoyed the strategy. In my engineering days. I wasn't a technical Well, I was a technical engineer, but it was in the water modeling water supply sector, but we developed strategies for big picture, what water authorities would need to be thinking about in terms of being able to plan for the water needs of the future. So it just always big picture. So I always had that in mind is like where are we heading and how we're going to get there. And I think that skill goes very well with that board role. And that chair of the board to.

Helga Svendsen 9:39

Where did your board journey go next? You've joined the Bendigo Sustainability Group and before you know, become president, you've then joined the central Victoria Greenhouse Alliance. And again, become chair. Where does your journey go next?

Karen Corr 9:51

Yeah, so during that time, I also left the corporate sector in the engineering and started to develop my own business. And I actually use the learning from the Bendigo Sustainability Group to develop a new initiative called Make a Change Australia. So I became the director of that, but then that ended up becoming part of a larger organisation called Jumpleads, because make a change was just my own idea. And I didn't want it to be made myself and if I was going to grow it, so I joined a larger organisation, Jumpleads. So I became an executive director of that not for profit, I shared that role with my colleague. And we also had some other board members as well. But we were largely running that organisation as well as being on the board. So that was a very interesting, it's on still Executive Director, again, it's very hands on because it's running the organisation as an executive in an executive role, but also being a board director, seeing how that thinking about that big picture and the strategy and the policies and governance as well.

Helga Svendsen 10:53

So Make a Change Australia, what is it? What was aiming to do? And did I hear that right, that it merged into Jumpleads that was already an organisation? Is that how it worked?

Karen Corr 11:03

Yeah, I would say so Make a Change was an idea. And it was an entity that was I suppose, or standard under my own, like just small business. I own ABN. So Make a Change is all about supporting local people who want to make good things happen. And so we run training and education and awareness around particular issues that people are passionate about fulfilling creating initiatives in. So that could be environment, health, and well being of social disadvantage, but also to help them be feel supported, that they can keep going and delivering those initiatives. And part of it came out of because I got burnt out in the Bendigo Sustainability Group. And I just saw thinking about my corporate experience and the training and support that you get in the corporate world, bringing that back to the not for profit, community sector, environmental sector, how can we make sure people are supported so that they can keep doing the really good work and important work that's needed, and not that well funded, and not that well supported? So that was what made the change was about. And then I became jump plates was actually about more of a arts organisation, but they were supporting artists and creatives in communities. So whilst I was supporting community sector, they were supporting the creative sector, there was actually a lot of overlap in terms of the training and the support and the capacity building that we were delivering. So make a change then became part of jump leads being the community arm. So yeah, jump leads is all about jumpstarting arts and community initiatives. So we have make a change, which is the community arm and pop up art, which is the art form.

Helga Svendsen 12:44

Okay, that's awesome context as well, having gone through that process. So let's return. So your now Executive Director, and you touched on some of that it's different to being a non Executive Director, what have you found in terms of just the way you approach that role, both as executive director, and indeed how that experience might also have impacted the way you approach your role as a non Executive Director?

Karen Corr 13:06

Well, I think it's challenging but yeah, it's it's much more hands on, but you can get so caught up in the day to day of the doing, but I've had to be really disciplined and and try to put time aside to look at the overarching picture as well. So it's not easy, I don't think I would necessarily recommend as an approach, but in so I look at our organisation essentially, is a startup. So it's so different to being on a larger government, potentially government organisation or other organisation, I'll be able to explain shortly about how you know, my learnings have grown from there, in my now more recent role, but I'm just being that startup phase. Again, very hands on that just making sure we're trying to continually think where is this heading? What other things do we need in place more strategically, you probably don't spend as much time on it as you could be in that way.

Helga Svendsen 14:02

So you gave us a heads up just a moment ago about there being a new board? In your portfolio? It's Inglewood and District Health Service, I think it is. So tell us about how you landed in that boardroom and what you brought to that boardroom.

Karen Corr 14:19

So yeah, I was always looking to have a take my board experience to the next level of really enjoy contributing it at a big picture level. So I applied by the Get on Board website, and I was very fortunate that the skills they were looking for in, I guess, stakeholder engagement and collaboration and partnerships, that is my bread and butter through my work with Jumpleads and Make a Change. So yeah, we've had a really good match and been part of the board's been wonderful so far. It's fairly new but very enjoyable and really nice to be able to be on the board and not be at that executive director role. And just having the support structures in place giving a lot of the training etc has been really good.

Helga Svendsen 15:03

I'm smiling wiley, it must be so nice to but yeah, as you said, the non Executive Director where you can say things in the boardroom and then just hand it over to the executive to do rather than saying things in the boardroom and going, oh, oh, I guess I need to do that. Because I'm both here in the boardroom and the executive.

Karen Corr 15:19

Yes, I'm very enjoying this next stage of my governance journey to be able to contribute at that level and not be the one to have to do it.

Helga Svendsen 15:30

Be more hands off. Yeah. So I'm interested in the board's role in stakeholder engagement. And indeed, you said there, that part of what you bring to the boardroom for the health service is community engagement, stakeholder engagement partnerships. It's sometimes not the first thing that springs to mind, I think, for board members in terms of skills. So how does that show up for you? And what is the board's role in stakeholder engagement, not necessarily at this board, although if you can share that great bit more broadly?

Karen Corr 16:00

I do feel like it's an under recognised skill that is so important. And so essential. Just to give you a couple of examples, from my past boards, the Bendigo Sustainability Group, we having that stakeholder engagement with local government, with businesses with government agencies, as well enabled us to come up with projects and programs that were funded, which was, you know, we needed that funding if we're going to forward our mission, which is to encourage and educate community on sustainability. So it's really to me, it's like one of the most critical things that you should have on a board but often not talked about, I guess it comes down under the strategy maybe. And I always think that in strategy, there should always be a component around stakeholder engagement.

Helga Svendsen 16:48

It's even within the strategy, I would say there needs to be something around stakeholder engagement. But it's also how you build the strategy. You can't build a strategy without having done some of that stakeholder engagement about who are your key stakeholders? What do they think of the organisation? What do they need from the organisation? What are the gaps? What are the strengths, all of those sorts of things is also built in a stakeholder engagement strategy, in a way,

Karen Corr 17:11

Definitely, I've also observed how some organisations don't necessarily even know or have properly articulated or listed who their stakeholders are, because they might be from so many different people, they'll be the people that they serve, the people that fund them, there's their staff, there's people in their community that might donate to them, depending on what the what it is. So yeah,

there's other organisations that they might partner with and collaborate. So having them all listed, and then working out well, how are you continually communicating with them? How are you ensuring that you're building those relationships and strengthening and growing them and you're listening also to what they want, and you're meeting those needs as well, definitely needs to be undertaken and incorporated into a strategy.

Helga Svendsen 17:56

So for you, how is that shown up for you as a board director, and I'm thinking more here more as a non Executive Director, rather than in your role as executive director? Because obviously, as Executive Director, it's a bit. Sometimes it's a bit murky, basically about what's the governance role? And what's the operational role? What's your view about how stakeholder engagement and partnerships? What is the governance role there? What's the role of the board in that it's great to have it in the boardroom, because you can prompt some of this stuff, but what's the role for the board in terms of stakeholder engagement and partnerships?

Karen Corr 18:27

I initially think that it's ensuring that it's covered properly within the organisation, you might not necessarily be the one doing it, but to just have that oversight and go hang on, how is this? How is our organisation engaging with its stakeholders and community? What might need to be put in place to be able to do that better? Do we need to go out there? And do we need to advise or ask the questions with the staff or the executive on how that's being approached and then coming up with strategies to go forward? There's also a lot of boards now and they have their own community engagement subcommittees? So yeah, that's certainly the case in the board that I'm on now, which I'm on of course, because I love it. I love the fact that I part of the reason I got into community engagement in all my roles in communities about how do we involve more people in what we're doing, because we're all so passionate about it, that it's often see people running programs or events and then they're not getting the participation they want. So really, to me, it's about participation in whatever it is the objective is that he will achieve. There's so many times when people are organisations aren't getting that participation that they want. So I'm trying to ask the question, why not and what can we do about it?

Helga Svendsen 19:45

For those people that are listening that might not be have their strong suit stakeholder engagement or partnerships? What are the things they should be on the lookout for, like participation I've heard is just one of them. They're what's your advice to board directors? What are the questions they should be out? asking what's your advice to them about what they should be looking out for in relation to stakeholder engagement and partnerships?

Karen Corr 20:05

It also depends on the size of the organisation. So I've certainly thinking that some organisations aren't necessarily putting the staff or the roles in place to do the work that's required. Some of the work to me can be quite simple. So how are we continually communicating with those stakeholders, and what messaging you're putting out there. So as an example, something I've identified recently, say a website needs to make sure it's clear and communicating in a way that is reaching the right people. But then a website's only one aspect. What about how are you getting the messaging out to your different audiences through different channels, and you've got social media? Or if you've got newsletter, what is it that you're wanting them to participate or get involved in? There's a lot of questions to be asked.

Helga Svendsen 20:53

For those that might be listening, just ask some of those questions. It's equally as important. Who's been engaged in this? How are they participating? Who might not be participating and who might not be engaging that we need to hear from are all important questions that we encourage all of you to ask whether you're the inverted commas, stakeholder engagement expert or not.

Karen Corr 21:13

Yeah, that's another thing is to how does it link with the overarching strategy on where you're heading? And because stakeholder engagement for the sake of stakeholder engagement is not there's not really a point to it? So firstly, looking at your organisation's strategy and where that impacts or requires the connection with your stakeholders? Why and lucky really need to have the why articulated why you engaging with your stakeholders? And then you can go from there.

Helga Svendsen 21:41

Oh, Karen, so much awesome stuff in here for people to take away? What are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Karen Corr 21:49

I guess the first one in terms of that leadership, or that board journey is putting your hand up and having a go, even if you don't know all the answers, and learn as you go take up those opportunities as they come. And then I guess the second thing is ensuring from that strategy perspective that you are aware of your stakeholders and how you're communicating and linking with them to get the best outcomes for your organisation and the people that you're serving.

Helga Svendsen 22:16

And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Karen Corr 22:20

Yeah, I would love people to find out about this TED Talk called "How to Achieve your most ambitious goals" is very inspiring. It's a person that basically says you can do anything just by taking one step at a time. And he's got some amazing examples from knitting, you took up knitting and ended up leaving whole village. Just because he that's amazing. You've got to definitely if you tried to learn and grow and then get an outcome in the long term. I think there's two TED talk is a great source of inspiration to see how you can do it by taking one step at a time. Oh,

Helga Svendsen 22:57

My God, no surprises that that's the sort of TED Talk you're recommending, as somebody who is committed to learning and growing along the way, it's been a bit of a theme and what we've heard from you today about your journey as well. So we'll make sure there is a link to that TED Talk in the show notes for people to have a look at. Karen, thank you. We've been talking about doing this podcast for a while and I'm so glad that we got the opportunity to finally hit record on one of our conversations. So yeah, thank you for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

Karen Corr 23:28

Thank you so much for having me. It's been real fun. And so yeah, so great to have the chance to finally connect and have a chat.

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