

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 259

Transcript – Kiki Paul

details how to move from CEO to non-executive director



Helga Svendsen 0:08

Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast. Being on a board can be an incredibly valuable, interesting and exciting experience. It can also be lonely, challenging, and let's face it pretty hard. So here are 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 Kiki Paul about moving from the CEO role to the NED role, and being clear about each of those hats that you're wearing. 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 of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. I also acknowledge any First Nations people that might be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connections to land, waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now, let me tell you about Kiki. Kiki is on the boards of Go Gentle Australia, Cancer Chicks and the Australian Online Giving Foundation. She was previously on the boards of Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Women's Shelter and Pandis. She's an experienced CEO and Non Executive Director. From 2016 until 2022 she was the CEO of the national charity, Go Gentle Australia, which was instrumental in passing voluntary assisted dying laws in all six states in Australia. Welcome to the take on board podcast Kiki.

Kiki Paul 1:51

Thank you for having me Helga. It's a real pleasure.

Helga Svendsen 1:53

It is so awesome to have you here. And I really want to dig into that story about CEO to NED. But before we do that, as always, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you tell me what was young Kiki like and when did you get your first inkling that you might end up as a CEO or as a board director?

Kiki Paul 2:12

So young Kiki was a little Dutch girl. So I grew up in the Netherlands, I was born and raised there. And my dad was a vet, an animal repair person, as he called it. And my mum was a traditional stay at home mum. And apparently, at a young age, I already had a bit of a bossy boots gene, perhaps. My mother told me the story of when I was about four and we were playing at the sandpit in kindergarten now, because it was in the Netherlands, and it rains a lot in the Netherlands, we had an indoor sandpit on legs, so we could sort of stand around the sandpit and still play with water and things, but we wouldn't get so cold and wet. But apparently, after the first week or so of kindergarten, the teacher told my mum that I was taking charge around the sandpit and directing and orchestrating play, and you should play with this and you should play with that and, and kept everyone in line. So hey, maybe it was that.

Helga Svendsen 3:17

Oh, I love that. Although, I would reframe it for a bossy boots to assertive, to knowing what you wanted. I think they're great skills to have, they're good leadership skills. How did you go? Well, you might not be able to recall, I wonder if your mother does. Clearly you had some clear ideas about what the other kids should be doing and playing with? How did they feel about that? Did they do as they were told? Or did they just do their own thing?

Kiki Paul 3:41

Well, given that there weren't any there wasn't any blowback from anyone and there weren't any negative comments. I presume that they looked at it with their arms sort of folded, going... interesting, look at what's happening there. But, but they weren't, and I don't recall any fights or being bullied or anything. So I presume it was all very peaceful.

Helga Svendsen 4:04

Well, even better leadership skills. I suspect, then if you knew what you wanted, you're able to direct others and not getting any blowback that sets you up very well for leadership into the future, I think. Right?

Kiki Paul 4:18

I think so.

Helga Svendsen 4:20

I love it. Well, look, let's leap into the conversation today. Then, as I said, at the top of the podcast, you were the CEO of Go Gentle Australia, and you're now a Non Executive director of Go Gentle Australia. That sounds to me like a great story to dig into, where should we begin that story?

Kiki Paul 4:40

Maybe it's interesting to divulge how I got involved with with Go Gentle. So we'd had a, my husband and I had run a financial services business very successfully. We'd had it for about 20 years, and we were selling it into a larger vehicle that was going to the stock exchange. At that time, our daughter I was in Year 11, sort of. So really starting that HSC journey, and our son was in year nine. And I thought, or it's probably time to just step away for a bit and spend some quality time at home. So I did that I stepped out of the business while my husband stayed and went on that journey. And initially, I thought I'll just take some time off and just be the stay-at-home mum and do all of that, which only lasted so long. I mean, you can only tidy up so any cupboards after which you go, okay, now what? So after my kitchen was speaking span, I thought, what's next, so I picked up a project to work with refugee communities and connecting them to North Shore mums, school communities, did that for a year, then wrap that up. And then I was, I got on the board of the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Women's Shelter and in the meantime, I was listening to podcasts as I was in the car a fair bit and I bumped into this podcast by this fellow called Andrew Denton. I'm going to presume that all listeners know who Andrew Denton is so leave that on there.

Helga Svendsen 6:12

Well, actually, I might get you to do a little intro because my point is everyone in Australia will know Andrew Denton, but we don't just have listeners in Australia, so maybe just give us the two second, who is Andrew Denton story for our international listeners.

Kiki Paul 6:26

Fair call. I hadn't realized that. So Andrew Denton is a, I think he's part of the national treasures of Australia. He is whip smart. He has a long history of producing television content, both in front of the camera as an interviewer and a host, but also behind the camera, developing shows like The Gruen Transfer, and some other really big Australian shows that some people overseas might actually know about. I don't quite recall all the names of them. He's very well respected. He's also an investigative journalist, and he has had a really long and very fruitful career.

Helga Svendsen 7:12

Yep. Beautiful. Thank you in Australia, I think renowned as a legendary, both storyteller, but possibly, more importantly, someone who is just unbelievably good at getting other people to tell their story, as all good journalists should do.

Kiki Paul 7:28

Yes, I have been told that he's interviewing techniques. I've even being taught at Australian Uni's now. So I think that counts is having it made.

Helga Svendsen 7:37

Excellent. All right, now that we all know who Andrew Denton is, back to the story of your...

Kiki Paul 7:42

... Back to the story. So I was listening to the podcast, which is called Better Off Dead. And it's a bit of a cheeky title. And it was an exploration into why at the time, we didn't have voluntary assisted dying legislation in Australia, whereas it seemed to work well in other parts of the world. So after the fourth episode, I was so moved, I thought, I want to tell him how much I love this. So I decided to write him an email, I did rewrite it six times because it is Andrew Denton and then you want to make sure that your words line up. And I thought I'm just gonna send him an email saying, look, love what you do. And if you ever need help, please sing out. But I never expected anything to come of it. I thought there's probably a producer that will look at that email and go, oh Andrew, listen to this. Isn't that sweet? Delete. Fine. That's it was never meant to elicit any response. But much to my surprise, a number of weeks later, the phone rang and his producer at the other end of the line said, we're starting an organisation would you like to be involved? And I was like, Sure, I'll be involved. I'll come volunteer, because I'm in between jobs that I don't know what I'm doing. So I volunteered. And after six months, I was well embedded in the organisation and was offered the role of General Manager initially, and we ran a campaign in Victoria. I supported the team in Victoria. And basically at the end of that, it was like, Okay, would you like to be the CEO? Course I would. That would be lovely. And there you go. So that's how that happened.

Helga Svendsen 9:26

I love the serendipity of oh, I like that podcast. Let me just reach out. I think it's a testament to reaching out with no expectations, literally taking the call, saying yes, getting involved and not quite knowing where that will land, but then landing you in the CEO role incredible.

Kiki Paul 9:41

And I have to say, even though I had run the business with my husband for 20 odd years, when the CEO role initially came up, I was like, oh my god, I can't do that. No, no, that's, that's too scary. I can't do that. And my husband, metaphorically let me make that very clear, metaphorically, slapped me around and said, "Are you silly? Go, go, go! So I did. And with great success, I must say I'm very, very pleased, we were able to achieve as a team, because only at the time of the recording of this podcast only two days ago, Canberra is the first territory to now pass an assisted dying legislation. So we've only got one territory to go. And then the whole of Australia will have voluntary assisted dying legislation. And I'm incredibly proud of that.

Helga Svendsen 10:35

So I'm interested, you're listening to a podcast, you reach out, you become a volunteer, and you become the CEO, and you're the CEO, I think, for six years or thereabouts. Is that right?

Kiki Paul 10:45

That's correct.

Helga Svendsen 10:46

And then you transition to a Non Executive Director of the organisation. Talk us through some of the machinations there, because that can be a tricky transition for you, for the board for the new CEO. All of those things, talk us through what happened there.

Kiki Paul 11:02

One of the reasons I decided to step aside, first of all, I was bone tired, because six years of campaigning is hard work. And I just wasn't being my best self anymore, because I was so tired. And there is, even though there is some distance to all the storytellers, so the people that came forward to share their stories about why this law was needed. And a lot of those stories involved either immediate suffering or suffering that a loved one had had in their process of dying, that accumulated, and that I found that harder and harder to deal with. So that was one reason. The

other reason was that I realised that, for the next phase of the charity, we really needed someone with a medical degree to take this subject now and take it to the medical fraternity. And despite all my hours of watching Grey's Anatomy, and House, and every medical show under the sun, that doesn't count and I'm not taken seriously, which I think is quite rude. But there you have it. So we're, we're lucky enough to nag Dr. Linda Swan, who has been phenomenal as my successor. And she's done a fantastic job and it really was the right choice. But because I had been there from the start, I thought it was important for the organization to keep some of that institutional memory. Because I had been almost solely responsible for building the infrastructure of the organisation, I thought it would be useful to keep that knowledge on the board, because that was not necessarily the skill set of the other board members, of course, they were aware to an extent, but not to the level of detail that I could offer and given that the remit of the new CEO would be slightly different. I thought it would be just prudent to keep that skill set. So I offered to remain on the board and I was delighted that the other board members accepted.

Helga Svendsen 13:14

Hmm. Okay, so I'm interested in for you what you did to help you change hats, and what, presumably consciously take one hat off, put the new hat on? And maybe also what was put in place to ensure that the, you know, you've taken off the CEO hat and given it to the new person, just what are the sorts of things? What was your thinking through that? And what sort of things did you put in place just to make sure the right hats were on at the right time?

Kiki Paul 13:44

So the first thing I did was write a huge handover document that had all the operational things in it and made sure that operationally all the checklists and everything were in place. We were only a small team who were only four. So I was CEO, COO, CIO, CFO, as you do in a small organisation. I'm sure there's many listeners nodding now and going yep, yep, that's me. Yep. Yep, I do everything. And then I had a wonderful campaign manager, PR and comms role rolled into one fantastic communications director and a graphic designer. So it was really important that we bedded down all the procedures so that operationally the organisation wouldn't suffer. So I did that. And that was very helpful because you then have on paper, all the stuff that you're not touching anymore as an NED, because that's fingers in and so my fingers in checklist was about 27 pages, but it was great to have that. The other thing was being very open in the communication with the team because we got on really, really well as a team and we still get on very well, thankfully, we just, it's, we've had some real friendships growing out of that. And sometimes they would come to me with a question I would go no, sorry, that's not my question. That's a Linda question. He's put you know the answer. I know. But that's not my question. That's a Linda question. And that was, that was very helpful. And I think, having done the AICD course, made a huge difference, because it gave me the framework to really have that solid distinction. But I also had had 20 years of training in that because I had my own business. So they're working in the business, working on the business distinction was always something that we were very conscious of. So the changing of the hat was relatively easy.

Helga Svendsen 15:54

How is that relationship with like, you're then on the board, you're in the boardroom, you're not in the business day to day, Linda's reporting to the board, so all of a sudden reporting to a group of people, which includes her predecessor, was there any, in as much detail as you're able to share, was there any tension there? Or is there any lessons from that, that you might be able to share that would help others in these sorts of circumstances?

Kiki Paul 16:18

I think, initially, in the first board meetings, I very much took an approach of observing and not commenting too much, and really checking myself for what would you have said here? What would you have done here? But remember, this is not your role anymore? You are now, you have a different role. So if I wanted to pipe up about something operational be like, no, no, that's not my job anymore. So zip it. So being very, very aware of that, and really being very conscious of that was helpful. And it was tricky too, because the board of Go Gentle has, as a very special relationship with each other, we get along well, very well, we also have a very inappropriate sense of humour. And there's a lot of banter, which makes for a really, really friendly environment to work in. But it's also tricky for a new person to come into that, because we've had the same board for about five, six years, there's that level of comfort and familiarity and to bring someone new in, that took a little bit of time, but Linda has been fabulous. And she just slotted right in and she's made changes that I was always hoping to get to, but never was able to get to, because we were in campaigning phase. And that was just such a busy phase where you have such different things to do. And look, there are things sometimes, decisions that she might make or points of view where I go, I don't necessarily agree with that. But that's okay, it's great to have all these different points of view on a board. And that's what you want. And we have, we can have really robust discussions about that as a board, as a group. And I notice also in within myself, how I sometimes respond to things differently. When I put on my CEO hat for a minute and go, how would I look at that from a CEO perspective and then put on my NED hat and go, that's actually different. That's very interesting. Now, why am I thinking like this?

Helga Svendsen 18:33

Again, that says, To me great self awareness that you know which hat you're wearing at any given moment, and being able to change them.

Kiki Paul 18:41

I think that's a really good tool for directors broadly, when they particularly when they note sometimes when you're in a board meeting, and someone puts a proposal on the table, there's a physical like, oh, I don't know about that. Well, you actually lean back or you you sit up and you go

mmm, or you fold your arms. And it's so interesting to realise, oh, this is what my body is doing. Why am I doing this? Let me put on that other hat and see how that changes my perspective. I think maybe that has to do with being bilingual, because I'm, I don't know, if you speak you're...

Helga Svendsen 19:16

Sadly not born and bred Australian, and therefore English only, which I'm endlessly disappointed about. But I'm interested in what you're about to say about being bilingual. So tell me more.

Kiki Paul 19:25

So I respond to things differently in Dutch to how I respond to things in English. And my tone of voice changes the way I speak changes. And my point of view sometimes changes. And that's a known side effect, if you will, for lack of a better word. So many people that speak multiple languages will notice that so maybe that's something that comes easier when you're bilingual, that you're easier and you're more aware of how a different language changes your perspective. So obviously different roles changes your perspective?

Helga Svendsen 20:02

Oh, that is so interesting. And it reminds me yet again, why diversity in the boardroom or indeed in any group is important, because you are bringing the perspective of a bilingual person. And the way that impacts different ways of thinking that is so interesting.

Kiki Paul 20:19

It is, isn't it? I particularly notice that change your perspective, when it comes to taking responsibility for things in Holland, I still call it Holland, it's officially the Netherlands, but everyone knows what you mean. We don't have fences around waterways, etc. You get wet, well, you've gone too far, pretty obvious? Whereas I feel that in Australia, there's there's very much a risk averseness. And there are some times when I look at it from my, or when I talk about an issue with a Dutch friend, we're both like, why do we need rules around this? Just use your common sense. But from an Australian perspective, it's like whoa, you know, it's very, very interesting.

Helga Svendsen 21:05

And it just goes to show doesn't it how common sense even just inverted commas, common sense is different? Australians probably say, well, yeah, we're lining up with common sense. But it's a different common sense.

Kiki Paul 21:15

Very much so.

Helga Svendsen 21:16

Oh, oh, my goodness, so much in here. So much. So we've covered a huge amount - changing hats, the story of how you ended up from listener to a podcast through to CEO of the organisation are now on the board of the organisation, and some of the lessons from that transition. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Kiki Paul 21:40

I think if you do the transition from CEO to NED is be very clear about your role. I took a couple of things with me. And that was particularly around the financials and making sure that the BAS is filed and the books are looked after and all of that. So I've kept the responsibility for that, as well as the public officer duties, which I think belong on the board. But there just wasn't any. I was doing it anyway. So it was easy. And so I've so I've kept that. But I think being clear about the role, and really looking at what you want your CEO to do as well, is very, very helpful to really being mindful of that noses in fingers out. But if you do need to put fingers in, where exactly do you put them? What are the points that you are allowed to touch? And you agree with the CEO on should be touched? Because if I think if you that's the main frustration that I see in other organisations and on other boards that the executive thinks it's like this, but the board thinks it's like that and there's not enough communications and not enough delineation of roles to really make clear who touches what.

Helga Svendsen 23:02

Absolutely and indeed, when the fingers are in, how long they're in for and when they're going out again.

Kiki Paul 23:08

Absolutely, yes, absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 23:11

Very valuable, I think for any organisation to make sure there is agreement around those things when what are the roles? who's doing what and what's the agreement around those?

Kiki Paul 23:21

I think there's not enough communication. By and large, there are organisations where it's done very well. But when there's friction, really talk about it.

Helga Svendsen 23:30

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

Kiki Paul 23:34

I don't really have anything, particularly around this particular topic that we've discussed. Other than I would say, if you have a chance to do the AICD course, I know it's a plug. But it's any further education about board roles, I think it's very helpful. But also, if you haven't been a CEO and you are on a board, go and talk to a number of CEOs. And ask them how they see their role. Because that varies from organisation to organisation. And in some organisations, it's very much a prescriptive. This is what you do, and we tell you what to do as a board. Whereas another organisation its like, oh, no, no, no, we're just here as a sounding board. It's your show, you run it, and there's everything in between. So it's really important when you're on a board, I think, to figure out where your CEO sits and what you as a board, expect from your CEO.

Helga Svendsen 24:33

Absolutely. And agree wholeheartedly that the communication line and that is so important, because it's different organisation to organisation. So you need to lay the ground rules for you and your CEO and your board and your organisation about where it might be. I love that. I will just note that in terms of resources, we'll make sure there is a link to the Better Off Dead podcast in the show notes so people can have a listen to that as well which is where the whole story started.

Kiki Paul 24:59

And there is season one and season two so please listen to both. If you're interested in the topic, it's a wealth of information. And there's still lots happening in the space. And it's such an important piece of legislation that I'm we're still really passionate about. So if anyone has any questions, they're always happy to come and talk to me.

Helga Svendsen 25:18

And as you know, only too well. It's amazing what happens when somebody just just reach out for a conversation or feedback or whatever it may be. So...

Kiki Paul 25:25

You never know.

Helga Svendsen 25:29

Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for taking the call. You know, hello, would you like to be on the podcast today? And for coming and sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community about this changing of the hats. I've really enjoyed the conversation. And I know those in the Take on Board community will also have enjoyed it. So thank you for sharing your time with the take on board community today.

Kiki Paul 25:50

Thank you very much, Helga. It's been an absolute pleasure. And you're absolutely right. That time goes so quickly. There is so much more to talk about.

Helga Svendsen 26:00

We can always get you back for a second episode, Kiki. There you go, folks. There's a cliffhanger. Oh, tune in there may well be another episode.

Kiki Paul 26:08

Thanks so much Helga. It's been a pleasure.

Helga Svendsen 26:11

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 and Facebook to find us. I'd 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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