



# Transcript – Madeleine Babiolakis on leadership skills, voluntary boards and a career portfolio

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Madeleine Babiolakis about building leadership skills in a new world of work. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we record. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I acknowledge their continuing connections to land waters and culture and pay my respects to elder's past and present. I support the Uluru statement from the Heart. I'll be voting yes in the referendum coming up later this year and I encourage others in the take onboard community to do the same.

Now, let me introduce Madeline. Madeline is on the boards of Careers Counseling Australia, the Women's Leadership Institute of Australia and she was formerly on the board of IABC, the International Association of Business Communicators Victoria. She is the founder and director of Shaping the Impact a consulting and advisory practice helping purpose led organizations achieve strategic impact. A former journalist and press secretary, Madeleine has advised ministers, CEOs and heads of large organizations, and now help stakeholders across government, technology and education sectors around the world navigate disruptive change. She is a passionate advocate of building leadership skills through a career portfolio, which has seen her join three boards in his many years. We'll hear more about that soon. Madeline, welcome to the take on board podcast.

Madeleine Babiolakis 1:26

Thank you so much Helga, a longtime listener and follower. So I'm very happy to be here. Thank you for the opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 1:33

Absolute pleasure. So as you know, before we dig into the topic of the day, I always like to hear a little bit of background about the guest we have in front of us. And indeed, the take on board community has often said to me never changed that part. I love hearing the background. So Madeleine, can you tell me a story about young Madeleine? And that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Madeleine Babiolakis 1:57

So the story that I wanted to talk about is the fact that I moved with my family when I was quite young from Zimbabwe. So my family is Greek background, but lived in Zimbabwe for generations. And you might know that in Zimbabwe, politically, it wasn't a great place to be at that time, around 2000 - 2001. When we moved, and for me, I saw my dad, my family have to deal with change and transition very early on. There were very challenging years, those first few years. But the way that we had to pick up and move I've always had that I think embedded in me is the ability to navigate change. And it's ironic that it's a lot of what I do now and will have a professional sense, but convey some of the earliest lessons I learned were from my dad. And now I know that it took him 14 months to find a job. I didn't know that back then, because he rented out an office and he went to work every day. But it was an incredibly challenging time and, and trying to build a home in a completely foreign place. So that's something that I've sort of taken to how I navigate my career, which has seen a lot of change. But then also in my own work, how I help leaders and stakeholders get through change, which is now in this new world of work and a constant.

Helga Svendsen 3:14

Oh, that is so interesting. Got all that stuff in there. But yeah, that constant change. And now that you work in change, and all that story of your dad renting the office

Madeleine Babiolakis 3:24

It is pretty amazing. And he I think it's a bit of a cliché that everyone always looks to their parents, but I really do from a professional in a personal sense in terms of what they went through. And everything was to give my sister and I better opportunities in terms of education and beyond. So I'm always grateful for that.

Helga Svendsen 3:45

It is one of the common themes I hear on this podcast when I'm asking people about their background, perhaps unsurprisingly, but that influence of the parents on what the kids come through, and that influence on them getting into the boardroom as well, whether it's parents being

involved in the community in some way, or you know, the commitment to education or whatever it may be, but really inspiring that next generation to do a range of things, including joining a board. So maybe we'll turn there now, you know, if we're thinking about building leadership skills in this new world of work, and as I say, I know you're a passionate advocate for people and young people starting to build their board portfolio, maybe talk us through your journey to the boardroom.

Madeleine Babiolakis 4:26

So just take a step back in terms of what a little bit of my my work history. So as you said in the intro, I started in journalism, and then I worked as a press SEC for a state government up to an election which was in a losing election. So having a job on a Friday and then losing it by Monday. It's a experience that a lot of people working in politics wouldn't would know to well, but for me quite early in my career that hit me quite hard in terms of then moving on and finding work quite quickly after that. And so I learned I think earlier on ad then perhaps maybe others that they have had more traditional career paths was the importance of constantly building, learning, navigating new industries, because you never know then when you have to find a new role. So from there, I ended up working in universities and higher education for nearly seven years, at RMIT, which is a wonderful organization. And then somewhere in between, I think COVID, one of the lockdowns, I don't remember which one it was. But I'd always wanted to be able to do more outside my one role, I'd always had this in me, but I wasn't sure how to implement it. And then I'd been talking for a while two different people are going through the interview process, there was a board that I'm on now and that I actually have taken on a chairing role of, it's called Careers Counseling in Australia. And it was previously known as CAV, which is the peak body for career educators across Victoria. And they have a charity associated with it and a board. And they gave me the opportunity. And I'm so grateful, because that was sort of July / August 2020. And it was the first board that I was able to join. And I had been going through an organizational strategy or planning process in my job at RMIT. I help them with resetting their strategy. Once I joined that board, everyone was so wonderful in terms of sharing their experiences, I was obviously the, you know, the newest one, and it was the first board I'd ever joined. And so I was very grateful for that experience. So what led me there was really wanting to do it for a while, but also not being a guest taken aback with the advice that people gave me, which was that it probably was too early on. They weren't sure I could do it. Why don't you just wait. So I think my main advice to people who are looking at perhaps joining a board and they haven't had, the positive feedback they're looking for is that there are lots of ways that you can start creating a portfolio earlier on your career. So from Careers Counseling Australia, then I also joined IABC, Victoria, and my background is as a as a communicator. And so that was a wonderful board to join and be a part of. And then most recently, end of last year was the WLIA, or Women's Leadership Institute of Australia, which is run by the wonderful Carol Schwartz. So it's been growing for me. And it's been such a wonderful addition to then also working for myself, which I decided to do April last year, so a huge advocate of board career portfolio, but also trying to inspire more people to know that there are different pathways to get to that board position. It

Helga Svendsen 7:33

I love hearing in a way that your first board was the Career Counselors of Australia. And that was a good experience, I would hope that it is given what they do as an organization. And ironically, or perhaps not, ironically, perhaps just logically, it has helped to build your career

Madeleine Babiolakis 7:47

100%, their career educators themselves. So they practice what they preach. And they, yeah, a wonderful group to be part of. And it's ironic also sorry to keep talking about my parents, but my mum went back into education quite late, because she took a step back when we move countries, and she works in career education. And that's been such a wonderful opportunity for her. And then having worked in universities was such a big part of my career, obviously a big advocate for lifelong learning and pathways, and it did work out. But there were a lot of times where I went for things, and I was rejected a lot of conversations, which I really hoped would lead into things and they didn't. So that's another message that I'd love to get across to your community. And people who have might not have joined boards yet to know that it's not a smooth process I wrote about this recently on LinkedIn is that you will see the success story at the end very often. But a lot of time that takes a while. And you just need the one opportunity to get started with the board role. So I hope that's helpful, because it would have been helpful to be in some of those times.

Helga Svendsen 8:52

Again, it's so interesting, you say that I was I was about to say, you know, Madeline it sounds you know, you're apply for this board you get on the board you get on the next board you get on the next board. It sounds like such a beautiful, magical experience. But no, there was some if it's okay, is there a story of one of those ones that you applied for that you didn't get? And just what happened in that and how you responded because that sort of stuff? As you say, you often just see the success stories here at take on board. We'd like to share the good, the bad and the ugly, if that's okay, would you be happy to talk us through being rejected from a board role, what happened and how you dealt with that?

Madeleine Babiolakis 9:26

I find that you can put a lot of effort into like there was particular applications that I put a lot of effort into, I got the reference checks and everything. And then you get that email back where you know, you just haven't progressed to the next round. What I found stayed with me longer. And this is why I'm so passionate about the importance of communication. And when we'll get I'm sure we'll get on to that. I had a conversation where I thought might lead to a board opportunity. So there were the emails I got, which didn't really lead anywhere the conversations and then there were particular leadership programs that would lead into board roles where I put all all, you know my personal story everything together and that I wasn't successful for. So there wasn't one particular

one there was a number of, but if I can get anything across is that very rarely I think people's careers follow this linear track of success, you might hear the nice story at the end, you'll hear the intro and all sounds good. That's great. But it does take time and effort and that resilience to keep going. And also know that very rarely, is the intent of what's being said, has the same impact. Like if someone is saying something with the intent of giving bit of advice, but I take it personally, the impact of that stays with me a lot longer than that person intended it. So I think being able to step back and take it less personally, and just keep moving on. Because I also believe that things happen the right time, the right reason, and there was a reason why the careers counseling, as surely were the ones that gave me my first opportunity.

Helga Svendsen 10:59

Tell me more, because I'd love to hear hear the story of how you got onto that board. What happened? And what was the reason?

Madeleine Babiolakis 11:06

The reason was that someone I'd worked with previously had been on the board, and then connected me with the chair. And they knew that I had an open process where I could meet, do the interviews. So it was someone to vouch for me, it was also the fact that the former CEO had ran careers education, trainings at a institution, I'd study that previously, there were a lot of links where I knew about the mission, the vision, the purpose, I knew that they also were resetting their strategy. And that was my background. And this is the organization. I've also started myself as around, you know, purpose led organizations purpose led strategy. So I believe that it's in an area that I'm particularly passionate about, it was a group that we're also very open to someone new coming in with very little no boarding experience. And it happened at a time, which I think I was quite ready in my in terms of my career, and I'd been in a leadership role for a little bit longer than when I first intended to be on a board. I think, because of what happened earlier in my career, which was working in politics and everything. I always wanted to do everything early. And perhaps when I first wanted to be on a board, maybe it was a little too early. And but I would say that it isn't too early, once you have started building a bit of work experience, and you're looking at volunteer roles to add to more of a portfolio, particularly women, I would say, as you're building up your career, most of the women I talked to might not apply for things if they don't feel 100% ready for each selection criteria. We know what the stats say. And so I would say just put yourself forward, you know, have the conversations and you never know what can come from it.

Helga Svendsen 12:43

Right? Yeah, put your hand up for some of those roles that are coming along. Yeah. Okay, so Careers Counseling Australia was your first board. Women's Leadership came second?

Madeleine Babiolakis 12:56

IABC and then the women's leadership. The other thing I really wanted to talk about was the idea of this career portfolio in this new world of work. So, board roles are a fantastic addition to building out your skills and different roles across your career. But I think that what I've found across the board across different roles, is the importance of these soft skills, these communication skills. So according to the World Economic Forum, they say 44% of the key skills in demand by businesses now are going to change in the years to 2025. And the ability to be able to communicate and engage across roles, across your career is so important. And I find that if you are joining different boards, working with different leaders and executive teams, you really are on the front foot in terms of developing some of those skills that are needed. So probably diverting a little bit away from your question, but rather than just talking about myself in the in the board roles as thinking for for your community, also about some of the advantages of adding an extra board role if they can see their full time role and seeing how it will be able to stretch them and also fill the gaps. Because we keep hearing about skills gaps, and all these sorts of things. You can build a lot of those through exposing yourself to different environments, such as boards.

Helga Svendsen 14:16

We often hear this kind of portfolio career bandied around I guess, by people who have a full load of boards. But I think what I'm hearing from you is that how did you put a career portfolio so there can be different portfolios within your career, some of which may be board work, and maybe other work? So talk me through what your career portfolio looks like and how that might be put together? To give others the kind of inspiration about how it might work?

Madeleine Babiolakis 14:42

It's a good question because I find it hard to define what my job is and a couple of words, but to give it a go. I work as a consultant and advisor through the business that I've started with and a number of organizations across government, technology and education sectors and they also sit on a couple of boards that we've talked about. And then outside of that I also facilitate leadership programs within organizations and offer coaching one on one so, but how I think about my portfolio is that it's a range of engagements with different businesses. And that works well for me, because I always wanted to be able to work in a way that was a little bit more flexible, and I can work remotely. I always liked working from home even before COVID was a thing and be able to join organizations, amazing organizations and be a small part of the impact that they're trying to drive. For me, at the moment, I have been on two boards works really well with the time commitments I have. But that's not to say in the next year or two that I might look more voluntary roles. So that's how I've constructed my portfolio if you are someone listening, who's in a full time role, and you're like, well, that all sounds great, but I don't have the time. And I've got a lot more going on. I would say that most jobs that I've heard of have flexible arrangements where you can do a little bit of time working from home, or you can do a nine day fortnight or whatever it might look like. And then also, if an opportunity for a board comes up, and you're looking at it, you see it on LinkedIn jobs or Seek, have

a look at the commitments of that board. Because I've been on a board, which we've had six meetings a year, I've been on a board where we've got meetings every month, and the engagements, it's more of a working board. So if it's a board where you have to attend meetings five or six times a year, and then might be a couple of other engagements is very likely that your organization might actually be quite supportive, that there might be slight changes in hours, but you'll be able to get a lot in return. So if what I said hasn't really related, perhaps looking at a particular board role that you're interested in, and then understanding what the time commitment is, might work for you. And then you've got one, two, and then a career portfolio kind of starts building itself.

Helga Svendsen 16:56

And if I can just add to it, I think the other thing for people to consider is if they are looking if they're working on a full time job, and they're looking at a board role, there is quite often benefit to the organization that they work for in their full time job of that person being on a board as well. You know, if you work in an organization where there is a board, and you might be writing Board Papers, for example, there is nothing like reading the Board Papers in another context, to give you great insight about what makes up a good board paper. So it's not just not just inverted commas, your own professional development, which is absolutely worthy and good. But it might actually be contributing to the organization that you're in as well.

Madeleine Babiolakis 17:36

Absolutely. And there are a lot of people that I talked to where they like their jobs, but they're like, I don't feel passionate about it. Sometimes you can contribute to an organization that in a voluntary role in an area that you're passionate about, you know, it might not be your full time job, but you can give back in a different way, while also adding and building your career. I make it sound quite simplistic, but it could be something that helps also with fulfillment in your nine to five

Helga Svendsen 18:02

Oh, you'll get no argument out of me. I've always tried to encourage people to get on boards and do it sooner rather than later, like you have. So it's a great story to share. You touched on this earlier about communication skills and the soft skills and how important they are for the career portfolio and a built through the board. I'm just wondering, is there anything else you wanted to add around communication skills, and you know how key they are for people.

Madeleine Babiolakis 18:29

So through Shape and Impact, which is the consulting in the advisory firm that I now work on or work through, there's a constant theme across all the organizations that I've had the opportunity to

work with is this challenge of navigating ongoing change ambiguity, trying to genuinely engage with teams, employees, stakeholders, and this need for, and I see it because my background is communication is the need to be able to communicate across a range of circumstances with a range of stakeholders and audience groups. And that is becoming even more difficult in terms of how we work now, which is, you know, remote or hybrid with ongoing change and uncertainty, the economic climate the way it is. And so, I would say that it's more important than ever, and I'm coming from a biased source. So let's just put that out there. But having come from a communication background and worked in senior comms roles, it's not just that having the skill of being able to communicate is a communicators role. I would say that great leaders are great communicators and they are able to communicate and paint the vision of the organization really clearly, as you would know the board has ownership over the strategy. They have strategic oversight of the organization. So right through from the board, to executive leaders, leaders, middle managers, however, organizations are set up, being able to have that alignment, that strategic alignment down to every employee being able to be able to feel part of something is so important and I'd listened to a recent podcast, we also don't want to talk too much more about strategic alignment, cause I know it's come up recently. But organizations, typically people don't know the strategy. Typically organizations are not very good at handling change. And it's very hard to do. And so this ability to sort of authentically communicate and engage is so important. And it's one of the things that I love helping organizations with, I believe it's a skill that can be built and developed. And it's not something that you either are a great communicator or not, I think it's actually being able to understand, empathize, understand how the strategy affects different people and be able to communicate with people knowing where they're coming from, and that it's a skill that can be learned. And I feel like it's a need at the moment.

Helga Svendsen 20:48

It's interesting, I think you've reflected earlier about it being I mean, communication is key anywhere, changes everywhere. And if you're going to have change, then you need to be able to communicate well, you also need to be able to communicate well, just to ensure a smooth dynamics in the boardroom, so that you can have robust and respectful conversations that end up in a decision, all of those things, they are key. And it's interesting, I think that they are both, I don't like the hard and soft skills terminology, I must say, but for the purposes of, because I know they're used commonly. It's both a hard skill and a soft skill, in a way, it's a technical skill. And it's something that is one of those soft skills that can be built as well. Yeah,

Madeleine Babiolakis 21:31

And sometimes if you come from a technical background, or you, you're not used to sort of being in that comms world, that can scare you a bit more just like if you have come from the comms world, and the technical expertise can scare you a bit more. But I think it's fantastic that through the last few years, especially that it's shined a light on the importance of these soft, but not soft skills, human skills, sometimes people call them and the ability to really drive change and strategy that has impact through them. And that we're also looking at it right from students and graduates, and how can we actually build those skills early, regardless of if you've got a manager title or board title, you



know, leadership and sharpen many different forms. And I know we haven't talked too much about this. But the other reason I got into what I do is I've seen how transformational inspiring leadership can be. And I believe at the heart of it is really how you communicate and engage with others. So thank you for the opportunity to talk about it.

Helga Svendsen 22:28

Oh, such a pleasure. Oh, so what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Madeleine Babiolakis 22:36

So a couple of key things, for me would be the importance of thinking about a portfolio career earlier. So you might not even be in your first big leadership role. But you might have an opportunity to volunteer, to join a working board and association. And just think about that as part of your career. You know, it might not be your one sole role, but it means that you're actually putting your skills into use, and you're meeting new people in a different way. So that would be my first one. And my second one would be to know that the path to success or to the kind of interest that love the intro that you gave me today is not linear, that there are a lot of setbacks. So be able to learn from each experience and know that very likely that outcome successes is not too far away. But just keep going and use conversations, either, you know, in terms of feedback and advice, or to clarify where your next opportunity will be. And third, in terms of our conversation about the importance of these soft, but not soft skills, the ability to communicate and engage. And if you are in a role, where that's not the training that's been offered, or it's not available to you, just being able to take a step back. And first of all, just examine like, first of all, building some of your own self awareness about how you communicate and you like to be communicated with and then whether it's a team member, or a senior stakeholder picking up how they like to work. Because very often difficult behaviors are often just different behavior. So how do you actually understand and work better together, you're already doing more in terms of how to communicate and engage more effectively.

Helga Svendsen 24:15

Oh, that is so good. Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Madeleine Babiolakis 24:20

Isn't that a bit more of my personality because I knew I had three or four things to share. And then my third one went for about about seven things. And so I'm huge podcast fan. So listen to all of them. I think my takeaway rather than one single resource is to think of it as it whether it's your board or career development, it's lifelong learning. That's what you know, I'm so passionate about that. And knowing what how you like to learn. So you might prefer like a podcast interview that has

like bite size, kind of, you know, interviews like there's a Lewis Howes one where he now does eight minutes of bite sized ones rather than an hour. Blinkist is a an app that I like with I do 10 to 15 minute summaries of leadership books if you don't have time. So if you are someone who has time poor, which most people probably are looking at things that can condense that kind of information, but I think my takeaway would be know how you like to consume and learn whether it's a podcast or book, mentoring, and then just prioritise that in your week, as much as you can.

Helga Svendsen 25:23

Again, excellent advice. I think about my own podcast listening, and I try to do it when I'm walking. You know, it's a win win. In a way if my podcast listening is down, it's because I haven't been out walking. And so I need to get out walk a bit more so I can catch up on my listening as well. So excellent advice. Oh, thank you, Madeline. That was such a great sharing of both journey and the realism of the journey and some really practical awesome tips in there for people. So thank you so much for joining me on the take on board podcast.

Madeleine Babiolakis 25:55

Thank you so much Helga.

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