

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 192

Transcript – Megan Buntine makes the case to start succession planning now.



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Megan Buntine about succession planning, and how boards should consolidate and strengthen. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this conversation today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and paying respects to elder's past and present and acknowledging their continuing connection to land to waters and to culture, and also acknowledging that this land was never ceded. I support the Uluru Statement from The Heart and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. Now, let me introduce Megan. Megan is on the boards of Into Our Hands Community Foundation,

Alpine Valleys Community Leadership, Morcare Services, and more care services. And she was formerly on the boards of Alexandra District Health,

Rivers and Ranges Community Leadership,

Victorian Public Tenants Association,

Kinglake Ranges Foundation. Megan has always had an interest in governance since she was a teenager and tapped on the shoulder to be the treasurer for her Venture Crew. Her work for government only increased her interest in good governance and the areas that underpin it. She now works and volunteers in the governance space, both through paid work and not for profit organisations, helping their boards and executives strengthen their organisational governance, as well as sitting on not for profit boards herself. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Megan.

Megan Buntine 1:27

Thanks, Helga, it's lovely to be here with you this morning.

Helga Svendsen 1:31

Oh so Megan, I am very keen to talk about succession planning. And indeed, it's been a topic in the Facebook group recently. But before we do that, as always, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me, Where were your parents born? And do you know where your ancestors are from?

Megan Buntine 1:51

Yeah interesting question. Dad was born in Warrnambool. And Mum was born in Yarram. So very much a country Victorian background, my heritage is Anglo Australian. So the Buntine clan came out from Scotland in 1838, and ended up in Gippsland. So did a lot of genealogy. So I sort of feel I've got lots of heritage around Ireland and Scotland in particular. But it's been really interesting. In recent years, I've also discovered I've got Aboriginal relatives, that's not Aboriginal heritage. But Aboriginal relatives are really exploring that aspect of our family tree, not my direct line of heritage. And it's something I'm really, really pleased to be connected, have that connection to, because like you, I support reconciliation, and I think we need to do more to support our indigenous country folk.

Helga Svendsen 2:43

Yep. I could not agree more. So interesting. I think that family genealogy, my father did a lot around it as well, for his side, which is back in Denmark, but it's so interesting, knowing some of that family history.

Megan Buntine 2:55

Yeah, it is, isn't it? It's interesting, whenever I go to Scotland, I have that sense of almost feeling like I'm home. And I don't know whether that's a constructed sense of memory, or whether it's something that's that's sort of real in your DNA. They talk about DNA memory, and things like that now, so I really appreciate how indigenous people feel about their country. And that connection to country, even where I live on time around country at Buxton, and we're in the foothills of the beautiful cathedral ranges there. And I feel that real pool to the country in the landscape, and we're in the area that was affected by the Black Saturday bushfires. So after that occurred, I really felt the change in the landscape, it just felt really damaged and almost dead. So seeing it come back from that has been great to see. And I guess it's made me realize how connected I actually am with the country in which I live now too.

Helga Svendsen 3:44

Yeah, well, it's interesting, I think, I don't know were less connected with country, you know, we live in apartments or whatever it may be, or we just we move away from feet on the ground sort of connection to country and no connection to country as a whole lot more than that. But somehow

there is a disconnect. I think sometimes and just being able to take that moment and reconnect is. It's a good thing to do.

Megan Buntine 4:07

Yeah, and I think for Anglo Australians, we often don't realize it until it's gone. That's certainly my experience at anyway.

Helga Svendsen 4:15

So we know your your parents in your ancestry and where you are now, where were you born and where did you grow up? And what about any siblings you might have?

Megan Buntine 4:21

So I was born in St. Andrews Hospital in East Melbourne. It was my younger brother. That's just the two of us and mum and dad moved into their house in Ringwood where I grew up about. They moved in in the ANZAC day before I was born. So Mum was quite pregnant. And Mum still lives there now.

Helga Svendsen 4:38

Oh, wow. Oh, my partner's parents still live in the house where he was born and it's just kind of beautiful to think of it. Yeah, just that same spot where you go and stay there because they're over and Adelaide we go and stay there quite regularly. It's quite lovely. So do you know about the traditional owners or the first people of where you grew up?

Megan Buntine 4:57

So I grew up in North Ringwood in Wurundjeri country and I guess back then, when I was at school back in the 80s, it wasn't something that we really learned about a lot. So it's been in more recent years, and particularly since I've been living in Turra Wrong country that I've sought out that information. And I think nowadays, there's much more information around them, perhaps was 20 years ago when I was looking for that information when we first moved up there. So you know, sitting in in the foothills of the cathedral range of so it's just such a beautiful place. I often looked at that and thought, I can't imagine that the indigenous folk who lived here, wouldn't have had a connection with this, because it's such a stunning, more inspiring sort of environment to be in. So yeah, it was really curious to find out more about that.

Helga Svendsen 5:43

It your writing is much more accessible these days. Yeah, I also grew up in Warren tree country. I've been democratic, but never would have known that at the time, I don't think. So how many languages do you speak?

Megan Buntine 5:56

Well, I speak English, obviously. But I speak a little bit of French enough to get me around in France, but I wouldn't call it fluent. When I was a kid at school, I loved languages. In high school, I did French, Latin and Indonesian, and particularly enjoyed French did that for six years. And my dream was to have a gap year after high school and go and live in France for for a year and really consolidate that language. But you know, went to uni instead and then started working. So it never really happened. So I'm sort of, I'm going to France from time to time and I figured I'd do my gap year in bits over my lifetime. And maybe when I'm retired, I might go on live there for a while.

Helga Svendsen 6:34

Exactly do it later. So you touched on this earlier in a way about kind of feeling at home in a way when you go to Scotland. But where do you feel your place or your home is?

Megan Buntine 6:45

Look where we are in terms of where we live at the moment in at Buxton in the foothills of the beautiful Cathedral Ranges, I really feel on a day to day basis at that time. For me, that's more home for me than Ringwood what is now. And I think they'll probably take me out of there in a pine box.

Helga Svendsen 7:00

Not a good thing to think about, but also a lovely thing to think about, in some ways, if that's the home, that's a beautiful place to be leaving as well in that way.

Megan Buntine 7:08

Yeah, that's right. I mean, we came to that land when we just had 40 acres of vacant land. And we built a house and put a lavender farm in and built b&b cottages and really built our life there. So that's where I've put down roots, I guess, in my early adulthood, and I can see myself being there for many, many years to come.

Helga Svendsen 7:26

Oh, I have to swing by Buxton, I think and take a look.

Megan Buntine 7:31

Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 7:33

Thank you. Thank you for giving us some of the background, it's always good to know a bit more about the people we have in front of us. And it's interesting, you and I have crossed paths many a time. And I haven't heard some of those stories. So it's fantastic to hear some of that. So thank you for sharing. Yeah, but let's move to succession planning the topic of the day. So, you know, succession planning, consolidating boards, strengthening boards, from your experience? Where should we start this?

Megan Buntine 8:00

Look, I think succession planning is something that a lot of organisations either don't do at all, or don't do particularly well. And it's something that I've really noticed, both in the time that I've, over the many, many years that I've been sitting on boards and management committees myself, but also since I've been working in that space. And I think that that the place to really start is a recognising that it's important. So many organisations, I go along to AGMs, and there's this flurry of paper, and they're still signing up people to nominate for their board or the committee. And it's like, Guys, this is not the way to be doing this. Being proactive, giving yourself plenty of time recognising this is an important thing. That's the place to start. I talked to many organisations who haven't even really thought about it. And I've often found myself in the organisations that I've sat on boards and committees of management for your people are still sitting in those roles after many, many years. They don't want to be there. They're burnt out there stale, they're not doing the best for the organisation necessarily, and they're not doing the best for themselves. So I think it's really important to recognize that succession planning is part of our good governance. And it's what we do to bring in new blood and new ideas and that new enthusiasm and freshness over time.

Helga Svendsen 9:11

So is there from one of the boards that you've been on. Is there a story that you can share about succession planning, either where it went well, or didn't go? Well, that might help us learn about the importance of it?

Megan Buntine 9:24

Yeah, look, I think most of the committees and boards that I've been on over the years have just in a way they've sort of fumbled along as well, I think where it really became apparent to me as a good example was when I was on the board of Alexandria District Health, and possibly because the health service or board recruitment went through the state government process. So government oversaw a lot of that that sort of had come in as a result of terrible issues that actually took place up around Bacchus Marsh, where they found that the board hadn't necessarily been terribly proactive ever and they could govern. So the state government took a bigger role in ensuring that that succession planning and recruitment was done a lot better. So, at the time that I came on to the Alexandria District Health Board, that process was already in place. So in the years that I was on that board, I sat on the recruitment committee both times, and it was great to be part of that process where it happened. Well, in advance, it was a really proactive approach, it was a net was thrown out widely to attract potential candidates, there was a thorough process that we went through, and we got some really good outcomes, we got some great people for our board. And for a little country town, really, that there's not a lot of population around, you might be struggling to get people who are willing to put their hand up or who've got the skills base that you're looking for, it was great to see that we were getting good quality skills based board members applying to be part of our board. So that was a that was a really positive experience. For me, I think, you know, I've taken that with me going forward from there, and both in the work that I do, but on the boards that I sit on now, taking that really proactive, you know, giving ourselves three to six months in advance to go through a process and throw the net out wide and, and really target who are the people who are going to add value? And what are the skills we're looking for. And not just putting an ad on your website or an ad on your Facebook page or an ad on ethical jobs. But really being proactive going out there tapping people on the shoulder, networking with people having coffees with people and talking to people about it, because I think the thing is when you you put it out there without doing the legwork. You don't necessarily get terribly much response. I mean, I think we've probably all had experiences where we've, you know, sent out an email to a network looking for a board member and all you get back is crickets.

Helga Svendsen 11:46

Yes, yes. All right. Well, look, if we can, let's take each of those steps. I think what I heard were do it well in advance. And you said that's three to six months and be proactive. So I want to come back to that and find out more about it be really targeted around what the skills are that you need, throw the net widely, and you've given some tips there have a really thorough process, and that will lead to good outcomes. So can we just dig into each of those steps a little bit. So doing it well in advance and being proactive in that three to six months in advance that a board is thinking about their succession planning what happens in there, like for your one at Alexandria, what did that actually look like?

Megan Buntine 12:25

I might even use another example that board that I'm on now that I started on a couple of months ago, the Alpine Valleys Community Leadership Board, I've been involved in the community leadership space before when we set up the Rivers and Rangers community leadership in sort of central Victoria. But with this board, we're looking to recruit extra board members. And so I'm sort of using a process that I would usually use through my work, because it's effective, it's worked really well. So I know it's a good process. So we're starting six months out from the time that we're going to have our AGM and have our elections because that gives us plenty of time to do the planning. So the first three months of that six months is around, go back to basics. Look at your skills matrix, what have we got around the table? What are the intentions of the existing board members, you know, who's perhaps the attorneys coming up? Or they're for personal reasons, they're deciding to step down? So knowing where you're starting from, then of the people who will be continuing, what are their skill sets? What are their strengths? What do they bring to, to the mix of expertise around the table. So then that obviously that highlights you gaps on your skills matrix that you then know, these are the areas that we we want to find people who bring those skills to us. So doing all that preparatory work early on. So you've got plenty of time to speak to the existing board members find out what their intentions are, and come up with a bit of a plan and some recommendations around what to do next. That will take time, particularly when you you know you're on volunteer boards, not for profits, you know, you might be a three or \$4 million organisation, but you still may only have half a dozen staff and you're running on the smell of an oily rag. So it might be that you know, the board members are much more hands on around some of this this stuff. Then once you've you've got that sense of what you need, then we actually go out and start looking for it. So yes, by all means, use those traditional methods that I talked about before even sending out to your database, putting it on your website, put it on your Facebook page, however you communicate with your stakeholders, but I think you've got to do all those other things as well that I talked about the more proactive stuff. So thinking as a board or as a recruitment subcommittee. Okay, who do we know within our networks who might fit the bill here? If you're a membership based organisation, thinking about well, do we have members that we know who've got some of these skills? Otherwise, these are people who we can tap on the shoulder that, you know, I might know somebody through another organisation or through some of my social contacts? How can we get that out? The other thing that I've been tapping into recently is corporate social responsibility programs. There's a few of the big corporate kids out there that have got programs where they support and encourage their people to link up with not for profit, not for profits is sort of the area that I focus on, I guess, to link up with not for profit boards that are looking for skills based board members. So one of those in particular, they hold events where they bring their people who've expressed an interest in wanting to contribute. It's funny, I call it speed dating for not for profits. So they have a little event where everyone does a pitch, you know, if I'm one of the professionals, this is who I am, this is my background, this is what my skill set is. And equally for the not for profits they present about this is who we are, this is what we're looking for. This is our strategy, purpose, mission, those sorts of things. So people can get a bit of a feel for who they are. In the short time that I've been referring people into this particular corporate. I've seen a lot of organisations getting success and you know, having more people than they can actually have places for so that's great, because I mean, how often does that really happen?

Helga Svendsen 15:58

Absolutely. That's music to the ears. Fantastic. Absolutely. Yeah. So really thinking about what you need, identifying your gaps, really throwing that net really widely, both with your own stakeholders, and then being proactive in a range of other networks. Are you still in the middle of it for Alpine Valley? Have you completed the

Megan Buntine 16:18

Yeah, we're only just really started. So at the moment, I'm sort of putting feelers out with the corporates. And, you know, we need to sit down and do a thorough review of our skills matrix. So we're really at the early stages.

Helga Svendsen 16:29

Okay. Can I get back to Alexandra Health? Because you talked there about once you've done those steps, there was a really thorough process. Maybe I misunderstood but I took to be about maybe it was around the shortlisting and the interview process and so on. Is that right?

Megan Buntine 16:46

Yeah. So we had with the help of the Department of Health, they collected all the inquiries and the expressions of interest. So we received the ones that were deemed suitable. And then we were able to go through that and do a proper process of you know, as a subcommittee, shortlisting those based against a scoring system working out who would be the best fit for the places that we had, and the skills that were perhaps lacking in our skills matrix. And then we gave that feedback, who we would like to interview to the department, and then they let those people know. And we set up interviews with them and went through that process of, you know, a good proper recruitment process as you would with staff, that also includes doing the all important referee checking as well. Because after years of recruiting with state government, I learned the hard way sometimes that what people tell you an interview is not necessarily what happens. So having someone who can actually verify that and talk to some of the things that they have talked about and enlarge upon what their role was in those things is really important.

Helga Svendsen 17:48

And so in that one for that organisation, how many did you interview? So well, how many roles were there? How many did you shortlist in interview?

Megan Buntine 17:56

So I think back to the last time, I was involved in recruiting for Alexander District Health, we had three positions to cover. And I think we interviewed eight people that time, we actually took four because we knew from experience that even though you might go up to what you consider your maximum number at the time of recruitment, nine times out of 10, you'll lose someone for one reason or another throughout the year. And sometimes it might even be more than one person. So we thought that it was a good risk management strategy to actually, if you like, recruit above establishment, as we used to say back in the day, and recruiting staff, you know, recruit extra people, so that you're covering yourself for that often inevitable loss along the way. So you don't get to the end of the board year and find that you've got a very small group of people who are governing the organisation and making those decisions.

Helga Svendsen 18:48

You touched on referee checking, agree, totally important to do. Who does that? Is that the chair of the nominations committee that does that, in that instance, who undertook the referee checks?

Megan Buntine 19:00

Yeah, so we did that locally on our board, made those contacts and spoke to people and got that feedback. So, you know, we were lucky, I guess, in those instances that everything came up as it should have. And there was there was no major issues there that people had misrepresented themselves as the early interview, but I think it's it's the ones that you don't check that thoroughly that slipped through and oftentimes, they're the ones that you have the problems with, isn't it?

Helga Svendsen 19:23

Absolutely. No, I think it's worthwhile. Even sometimes from referees, you learn, even where people might develop best where they are or how they thrive best. You'll learn all sorts of information. It's definitely worth doing.

Megan Buntine 19:37

Yeah, absolutely. I think that that applies for even the smaller not for profits. I'd encourage people as much as they sort of think I would, that's all that's governance stuff where it's all too hard. We just want to focus on what we do on the ground, the operational stuff, I just try to impress upon them if you don't get the underpinning stuff, right. It's going to impact and it's going to frustrate your operational day. Did i. So, you know, if you can do it from the outset, make sure that the people you're bringing into your organisation to govern and direct your organisation, good, solid, sensible people, then you'll save yourself a lot of hassle down the track.

Helga Svendsen 20:15

Absolutely. Because you also can't Well, depending on what the Constitution of an organisation says, you can't necessarily sack a board member like you can a staff member, it's different. It's a whole different ballgame. So you definitely don't want to end up with the wrong person or worse people, you know, group of people governing organisation? Yeah.

Megan Buntine 20:36

Yeah, that's actually you've just reminded me of another point that I think is really important in that succession planning in the early phase in that planning phase is to go back to your constitution or your rules of association. And look at what does that say around recruitment and numbers and tenure, all those sorts of things, I see more and more organisations, I'm sure you probably see this trend, more and more organisations are building in limited tenure and perhaps, multi year term. So come on, one I see is three by three. So we have a three year term. And we can do a maximum of three of those, it almost embeds that notion of having to succession plan, because you know that you're not going to be there forever. But equally, it takes the pressure off that people you know, they're not still there 20 or even 30 years later, thinking I can't leave because there's no one who will pick up the mantle when I go. So I think that that's really important, too. Next time you do a review of your constitution, think about those sorts of things. Think about, well, how can we set our organisation up for that renewal and make it part of what we do. But equally, you know, it's a good trigger point, I find so many organisations that their constitution or the rules actually don't reflect the current practice. So they're out of date, they need a review. So it's a good trigger point, if we can think about the succession planning, to remind us to go back and just have a bit of a check over our rules. Do they meet our needs? Are they up to date? Do they reflect our current practice? Particularly around obviously, the recruitment of board members?

Helga Svendsen 22:04

Absolutely. When in doubt, check the rulebook. Oh, man, you again, so much. Just gold information in here? What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Megan Buntine 22:19

Look, I think as you sort of summarize those points, I think, do it early, be proactive, go out and seek people out, don't wait for them to come to you. That's really important. And, you know, being committed to following the process through for the good of the organisation. And because I guess the organisations that I've seen that do this wells have such good results, they really consolidate a good strong board going forward. They've got new fresh people who've got great ideas, and it just really reinvigorates the returning board members as well.

Helga Svendsen 22:49

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

Megan Buntine 22:53

Yeah, look, I think my favourite resource is Not For Profit Law through Justice, Connect, they have so many awesome resources there. They've got guides for running companies limited by guarantee, they've got guides on just about everything you could imagine to do with governance. So I think they're a fabulous resource. And I commend them to anybody who's involved in the not-for-profit governance to go and check it out. See what they've got there? Because I'm sure you'll be able to use a number of the resources that they have.

Helga Svendsen 23:21

Great, I think, yeah, it's an excellent website. I agree, wholeheartedly. Thank you, Megan, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing some of your wisdom about succession planning and some of the stories around succession planning. I know the Take on Board community will get a lot out of our conversation today. So thank you for taking the time.

Megan Buntine 23:38

You're most welcome. It's been an absolute pleasure. I've been wanting to do this for a long time because I love your podcast and I think you get to have some fabulous conversations. So thank you.

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