

Take on Board

Transcript – Suzanne Brown and the importance of storytelling for board members



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Suzanne Brown about the importance of storytelling for board members. First, let me tell you about Suzanne. almost straight out of school, Suzanne talked her way into a job at the ABC, where she worked on everything from kids shows, news and current affairs, documentaries, drama and arts programs. Since the ABC she has been producing, writing and editing stories for industry, corporate magazines, blogs, not for profits and social impact projects. Suzanne loves the power of a story to broaden perspectives, remind us of our common humanity and make people care and create change. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Suzanne,

Suzanne Brown 0:42

Thank you so much for having me.

Helga Svendsen 0:44

It is fabulous to have you here. Because storytelling is such a key thing for board members. But before we go there, I always like to dig a little bit deeper about the guest. So can you tell me a story about young Suzanne, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Suzanne Brown 1:00

Well, actually, I'm in the interaction, you probably said most of it. But I've been involved with telling stories forever. I come from a long line of storytellers, mostly jokes, but and I'm not very good at jokes. But I love a good story. And then yes, having worked, I worked in theater as a child as a teen and then in the ABC. And since then telling stories for all sorts of people. And actually it was it was probably something that happened when I was not so young, that really put me on the path to where I am now. I had a little little brush with cancer, which was it was all fine. I was one of the lucky ones. It was early. And it was just a blip, not a battle. But it made me really think about what I wanted to be doing. And I thought I really want to be working with the not for profit sector or the for profit sector, to help them tell the stories that will get them all the support that they need. And

there are so many good stories out there. But we don't hear so many of them. And people get this perception that the world is this rather dangerous, awful place where everyone's just out for themselves. And it's all pretty dire. But in fact, there's a load of really amazing stuff happening and wonderful people doing wonderful things. And I would really love to be just telling those stories more often just to even up a bit. And give people a sense of hope. Because without hope there's there's no change. People don't do anything about the environment or each other. So that was how I got to be working with nonprofits and for purpose. Okay,

Helga Svendsen 2:38

So I've got two follow up questions there. One is, what were the stories you loved when you were a child? So it's partly about the stories back then. And where do you go now for those stories of hope today?

Suzanne Brown 2:49

Oh, that's a good question. Well, back when I was a kid, I actually, I still love them. I love detective stories. I realized only recently actually, the reason why I love them so much is because it's sort of making order of chaos. And writing righting wrongs, I suppose. But yeah, when I was a kid, I would read three books a week on average, and I went through the local library and read all the, you know, Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie, Trixie Beldon, Nancy Drew all of those, I just loved them. But now I really like biographies as well. Like real people's stories. And in terms of where I go to for good stories. Now, there are some really fantastic organizations that do this. My favorite would be Future Crunch. And they are, they're just amazing. They have a newsletter, they have a free newsletter, which anyone can sign up for. And they have a paid one which has a little bit more information. But they gather incredible stories from all around the world about advancements in science, the way people are turning around, health issues in poorer countries, the environment, it's just there, their newsletter is jam packed full of incredible, inspiring and very hopeful information. There's also an English platform called Positive News. And they they do very similar thing. On Instagram and Facebook. There's also places like the Good News Movement, which is an Australian organisation. There's the Good News Network, which is an American one. There's good stuff, there's so many good things and and I'm an avid reader of all of them.

Helga Svendsen 4:35

Oh, fantastic. Well, you're right, there is plenty of doom and gloom in the world. And that's often what gets the headlines. But there is far more stories of hope. If we just scratch the surface and find them so I'm going to dig out some of those resources that you've just mentioned so that I can keep those stories ever hope front of mind. Yeah, this conversation came about oh, look, I think we'd met in a virtual cuppa and then you wrote a blog. About why board members need to be storytellers. And so I thought that was a great conversation to have here on the podcast about storytelling for

board members what it is and why it's important. So why do board members need to be good storytellers?

Suzanne Brown 5:15

Well, I think board members need to be good storytellers for all sorts of reasons. One of the biggest ones, though, for me is that because they're not involved in the day to day running of an organisation, they can actually have that sort of higher view of what's happening, and are often much better placed to tell the story of that particular organisation, than the people who are running it. So I think from an organisational point of view, it's important, and if they've got stories, if there's a storytelling culture in that organisation, so people are sharing stories all the time, it helps connect the staff and helps connect the board. And it helps the board connect to why they're there as well. Because as you say, in your intro, being on a board can be hard and lonely, sometimes, I think it's really great to be able to connect with that passion that made you participate with this board in the first place. And I'm pretty sure it's easy to forget that. So having that personal story as well is really important. Stories are so important generally, because they engage the senses and the emotions. And the more you experience that oxytocin release of empathy, the more you trust the storyteller. And that's important for all leaders, I think, and you know, like data just doesn't engage the same way as stories do. So you can have all sorts of statistics, and people won't remember half of them, and they won't engage with them. But if you tell a story, people will remember it. And I mean, I recently which actually, I worked on a big corporate project. That was it was all about a transformational change, which was big, there was going to be a lot of pushback, and we compiled this 200 page report. And it was so detailed, and so well researched, and so well written, then it was I didn't I didn't do it or not blow my own trumpet. But it was this amazing report. But you know what really turned it around with the seven minute video, we did have people's stories about why they needed this transformation and what the problems were. And that was just a very powerful reminder that stories trumped data every time as Brene Brown says, stories are data with song.

Helga Svendsen 7:43

Sometimes it feels like is there a topic that we can't connect Brene Brown to she is everywhere. Probably because she's a good storyteller in some ways.

Suzanne Brown 7:52

Well, she's an amazing storyteller. And she does it with such humor and self deprecation as well, that it's some, she's she's quite a special gal, that one.

Helga Svendsen 8:03

Storytelling is not often on the skills matrix of skills that boards need. It's not often on the board agenda. Although interestingly, I shared this just before we hit record, one of the boards that I'm on is the royal Women's Hospital, and lots of hospitals will share a patient's story at the start of their meetings, which is a great way of connecting to what the organisation does. And to remind all of the board directors, you know, it's not about just taking off the data and the compliance as you say, what are we really there for our patients first and foremost. And as staff, like I say, it doesn't often appear on the skills matrix, it doesn't often appear on the board agenda. How can boards connect to that storytelling? How can they make it part of what they do?

Suzanne Brown 8:48

Well, I would love to see all organisations develop a very strong storytelling culture generally, and carry that into the board. So the staff can tell regular stories, and you could have 10 minutes at the beginning of every meeting, and people just bring a story about something that they've heard or something that happened. And then any of the really good ones can get carried into the board. To give it it just gives them so much to talk about. And as you say it connect with what the organization is really doing. And it doesn't have to be a sort of fit for purpose one as well. You know, every organization has amazing things that they wanting to achieve. And it's not necessarily all about just money.

Helga Svendsen 9:33

Yeah, and not just about good stories. I think either again, at the hospital, when we share patient stories, or sometimes staff stories, they're not always the good stories, because you can learn a lot from this from the challenges as well.

Suzanne Brown 9:47

Yeah, yes. So right, you you actually learn a lot more from those. And yes, it really helps point up what needs to change and sometimes that needs to be driven by the

Helga Svendsen 9:59

I agree you know, your point around is it just for not for profit boards, I think storytelling is relevant for any board. And again, we touched on this just prior to hitting record, if I think about the Qantas board at the moment, and my my punt is if there was more storytelling in that Qantas board room, then I don't know, talking about the bottom line in the conscious boardroom, there might be very different way things have been played out in terms of their strategy, and so on as well.

Suzanne Brown 10:27

I totally agree. And I'm one of my favorite books is a book by Michael Margolis called Story 10x or 10 times, I'm not sure how you say it, I've only ever read it. And his organisation helps all sorts of organisations tell their stories, and particularly when they're going through a tough time, everyone needs to connect to why they're really there, and what they're actually really doing, particularly in times of change. There's a lot of uncomfortable stuff going on. And if people don't understand what's behind it all, and what the end game is, it can be really confusing and alienating for people and frightening for people, organisations, getting their stories, right, can just connect everybody in a very simple, I mean, yes, working out, the story's not always simple. But once you've got it, it connects people so quickly. I mean, we're all hardwired for connection, as Brene saying. And stories connect to so much faster than anything else can,

Helga Svendsen 11:32

You know, one of the key roles for boards is to set the strategic direction of an organisation. And again, strategy can be, you know, a nice, neat flowchart plan on a page and or it can be around stories, and what those stories tell you about that organisation and where it wants to be, and so on. So, so for board members, what can they do to work out either their story or their organisation story?

Suzanne Brown 12:03

Well, I would love to see at the beginning of every meeting a story as you say, or they could even put a whole meeting aside to actually have a little workshop themselves. And it could be no need only be half an hour, but just sit down and have some have some time to think about, you know, what attracted each board member to that organization? Why do they care about it? What are they proud of? How much does it align with their own purpose and values? You know, which stories resonate with them? And why? Why should somebody want to work there? Or support them? If they're not for profit? And what do they actually achieve in terms of what their customers or their clients or whatever, get from what they do? It means getting back to their why I suppose. And also, you know, have a think about if there was anything at all this organisation could do? What would have been, you know, start to dream big and think how things could work. And, you know, the world's changing so fast, I think it's actually really, particularly the business and working world, it's really important to reconnect to that fairly regularly, I would think, you know,

Helga Svendsen 13:19

I'm thinking about the last couple of years, where our connections have been exactly how we're having this conversation, which is via video conference. And I'm wondering what your observations are about the use of storytelling or the value of storytelling over the last couple of years, given we've

been disconnected physically, just what the role of storytelling, I guess, has been in that period of time, in building connection,

Suzanne Brown 13:44

It's been even more important during this horrible pandemic time. And for my observation than the organisations that were able to tell the stories and keep people connected through the stories of what they're achieving. And you know, how they're working together, the great stories about, you know, working from home and what they've managed to do in their disconnected state and all that sort of stuff. They're the ones that thrived. And the ones that were just like, Okay, well, that's just business as usual. You're just doing it from home. And, you know, that didn't really work for a lot of people, and particularly if they had kids that they had to home school, and all that sort of stuff. So yes, I think the storytelling has been even more important lately. And I think a lot of people still aren't very good at it. So it'd be great to see more of that. But also just getting back to the board members, personal stories. I just recently did a workshop with the nonprofit Alliance and it's their purpose workshop. It's a workshop they offer anyone can do it. And it was it was so interesting for me because I've spent my whole life telling other people's stories, and to then sit down and have to think about what my story was and think of six images and six moments that sort of define my purpose. It was really challenging. But it was such an interesting exercise to do.

Helga Svendsen 15:10

So what was it six images and six, six moments? Can I ask that you share what it? What did you come up with for either your images? Or well, you don't necessarily need to share all of them. But I'm interested in what you shared for some of those things, if you're willing to share.

Suzanne Brown 15:27

To try to remember what they were now, because I was so busy at the time I was quickly. And then, but well, some of them were around, you know, moving around a lot as a kid and studying several new schools, being the eldest child and having to look after everybody. There is also some, you know, some not so great moments where I had to nurse my niece who was not well, and she didn't make it. So that was that was a big turning point for all of us. Of course. Yeah, it was pretty awful. So are talking my way into the job at the ABC was a really big moment.

Helga Svendsen 16:07

How did you do that? Tell us the story.

Suzanne Brown 16:10

Well, I was working in a theater company, because I'd grown up, my parents have always worked in amateur theatre. And I've started doing it. As soon as I was allowed out of that at night, I was actually working for a ballet company, and the ABC came to film it. And I said to them, you know, I've always wanted to work in TV. And I've read to the ABC a few times, and they've never written back. 20 years old cheeky, yes. And in fact, I had a job as a camera assistant going in the news crew. They never had a girl before, but they thought that I was quite feisty, and could be okay. So they said, Look, there's a job going, come and see the boss tomorrow. So I went up there and I was tiny hair down to my waist. 20 years old, very wet behind the ears. And the boss looked at me as if to say, Oh, little girl, why are you wasting my time? And I thought, I'm not leaving without this job. So basically talk to him and told him stories for about 45 minutes. And he said, Okay, you can start on Monday. And then as I was leaving, he said, you don't really want to be a camera assistant do and I said, not really. And he said, there's a producer's assistants job going in six months, don't stuff it up, and then you can have that. So that was I mean, I don't think you'd ever get a job like that anymore. But that was a big turning point for me.

Helga Svendsen 17:35

Well, it's interesting, even in sharing that, you know, something to take on board community or on boards, something to take on board community are looking for board roles. So there's another angle on this storytelling side of things. Partly, it's for what boards need to do to connect to their story. And you've given us some, you know, think about moments, think about images, here's some questions to think about. But that is a beautiful example, for people in the take on board community to think about how are they telling their story to get into the boardroom?

Suzanne Brown 18:03

Oh, yeah, that's a really good point. Yeah, working out what your passion is, and how your passion can align with what that organisation is doing. And that's very compelling for anyone who's employing people or engaging them to be a board member. Yeah, absolutely. Well, you can check out the nonprofit Alliance have actually made some videos of some of this six moments in six images for some of their not for profit leaders on their YouTube channel. So if you wanted to check it out, you could done see what and even do the words?

Helga Svendsen 18:39

Yeah, okay. Well, again, we'll make sure we link to that. So doing some of those questions that you listed before, as I said, the images, the moments, so for boards in thinking about having a storytelling culture, those are the things that they should think about? What about the individuals that are turning up for a board role? Is it a similar sort of, I don't know, I guess framework or thinking in thinking about telling their own story. What's your advice to them in terms of, you know, you talked

your way into your job at the ABC, what's your advice in terms of using storytelling for people who need to talk their way into their board role?

Suzanne Brown 19:14

Well, if you've got a story about something that you've done, that shows your passion, that really demonstrates your passion in a powerful way, I would be really telling that story. The most important thing would be apart from your credentials, which would be an obvious one, but what your passion is, why, why it's important to you to be on board and what you bring, but I think I'm probably not telling anybody anything new there. But but definitely having a good story about something that you've done, even if it was when you were a kid, you know, that demonstrates you're very passionate about this, what this organisation does, it engages

Helga Svendsen 19:58

Absolutely And most of the board interviews that I've ever been interviewed for or interviewing for, the first question might be tell us a bit about yourself or something to get started. But then why insert name of organisation? You know, back when I was on the board of the YWCA, why the why? Why do you want to be on this board with this organization and having a candidate who really, as you say, shares, their passion, highlights, their keen interest in the area by a story is much more likely to pique the interest and you'll remember them, as you say, the data, it's like, oh, I'm interested in this, that and the other, tell me how and why and what the story is behind it

Suzanne Brown 20:40

I mean, they'll all register there and everything, but it's bringing that and bringing that person and bringing that to life. And story is definitely the best way to do that.

Helga Svendsen 20:50

Oh, okay. So there's already so many tips and tricks in there. But I'm wondering what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Suzanne Brown 21:00

Oh, I think the key things would be that board members can often tell the stories that their organisation can't, I think knowing and telling their own story and their own purpose and how it aligns with what the organisation does is really important for each of the board members and how you work together. But also important for the organisation's to hear. And I think, getting your personal story clear, and your just reconnects you to why you're on this board in the first place, and

how it aligns with your passion. And that's always very handy when the going gets tough. Is there at two o'clock in the morning, go? Why am I doing this? Yes. And just that stories can bring data to life. Yes, so people don't remember information, or they only remember about half the information. And there's a great talk by a woman called Karen Eber. But she she goes into a lot more detail about why stories are important, and how they line up different areas of your brain. And why they stick.

Helga Svendsen 22:07

Yeah, which is interesting in thinking about, you know, boards, outputs, inverted commas, you know, there's often an annual report, which can be the finances and a copy of your profit and loss statement. Or it can be I mean, you have to include that. But it can also be stories. So thinking about how all of that how your strategy is presented, and bringing the stories in how your Annual Report is presented. And I love that idea of you just don't often take time to go around the board table and say, Well, why are you here? Why are you here? In this particular boardroom? Why are you here, I love that being able to connect to it. And sometimes those things happen in individual conversations in your coffee catch ups, but don't often happen as a as a team. I love that prompting.

Suzanne Brown 22:48

And I think, especially if there's a bit of tension on the board, say, it's really important to do that. Because, you know, once you know what's driving a particular person, it's much easier to understand where they're coming from, and have some empathy for them and then deal with it in a more compassionate and understanding way. So...

Helga Svendsen 23:08

Absolutely. We've already shared some resources. But is there a resource you'd like to share with a take on board community? Or I think

Suzanne Brown 23:15

I have shared them? Or actually, yeah, I have a little blog that has storytelling articles sometimes. But read story 10x. It's amazing. He also has a really good formula for telling stories as well, which is

Helga Svendsen 23:30

Are you able to share that? Or is that a whole other conversation in and of itself?

Suzanne Brown 23:34

It's a whole other conversation, and he would probably do a really good elevator pitch, but I would probably be a bit long for me to try and explain it.

Helga Svendsen 23:42

Ah, all right. Well, look, thank you so much for taking the time to share it initially in the blog, which is what attracted my attention as part of this conversation. And for taking the time to share some of these ideas with the take on board community. Like I say, I think it's valuable both for those that are in the boardroom. And for those that are seeking to get into the boardroom as well to really think about their own personal storytelling and the storytelling of that organization. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the take on board community today.

Suzanne Brown 24:11

Oh, it's been such a pleasure. Thanks for having me.