



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 295

Transcript – Tracy Bongiorno and the WILD for STEM program and wants more women go get wild

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Tracy Bongiorno about the WILD for STEM program. We also might touch on her journey to the first boardroom. But you know, let's see how we go before we start recording that podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me, I am on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. I also pay my respects to any First Nations people who may 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.

Helga Svendsen 0:46

Now let me tell you about Tracy. Tracy is the CTO at Mentorloop with extensive experience in scaling SAS businesses and fostering high performing teams. She is passionate about people centric cultures, collaboration, governance and building software that empowers people. Tracy also organizes Tech Leading Ladies, a community that supports women in tech leadership. She thrives on solving complex challenges and driving meaningful change, which is why she's eager to increase gender diversity in Australian boards. Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast Tracy.

Tracy Bongiorno 1:20

Thank you, Helga, that was a beautiful introduction.

Helga Svendsen 1:25

Now I am really looking forward to our conversation about WILD for STEM. But as always, before we dig into that, I want to dig a little bit more into your story. Can you tell us a story about young Tracy that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today?

Tracy Bongiorno 1:40

Of course. So in my schooling, in my youth, I was always very interested in science and math, bit of politics, but that didn't end up proceeding that direction. So I was, after high school, torn at the time between politics and math, and then I decided to go with math and science as my degree for university. So I went to university. I went to Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California, and studied math and science.

Tracy Bongiorno 2:15

And then after I completed my degree, I was, of course, looking for work. I was looking for something related to math that I could use what I had learned in school in my career. So I was interested in economics and math and how that worked together. Maybe a little interested in the hedge fund kind of space, which led me to look for roles in an analyst type of position, and I didn't understand at the time that that was such a broad type of role, so I ended up interviewing at a company that helped sell life insurance. I didn't end up getting that role, but one of the founders was also a founder of a tech startup, and said that I would be a good fit for that role, and wanted to have me come back and talk to them. Long story short, I joined that organisation and learned a lot on the job about software engineering, and I grew my career from that tiny little startup. That startup was acquired, and so my career in software just went from there wasn't something I had planned. It wasn't even something I had considered a career in software technology or coding or anything like that. So that's sort of how I ended up here. You know, math background is helpful in that analytical thinking and problem solving space. So that's how I'm ended up here.

Helga Svendsen 3:42

There's so many little bits and pieces in there. I could also dig into it. I think even back at the start where you said, you know, I decided to do maths and politics, it's like, wow, I wouldn't have thought chalk and cheese. I would have thought they're quite different. But it's also an interesting story just about the almost, I guess the synchronicity, just that you go for this role, don't get that role, but it lands you in a different network and a different role, and that lands you where you are today, and just seizing those opportunities as they come, even if they're not quite what you expected at the start.

Tracy Bongiorno 4:12

Yeah, exactly. It's life is a long journey.

Helga Svendsen 4:17

One other thing I want to dig into. You said you went to university in California. There is, of course, a little bit of an accent going on there, but you are now based in beautiful Australia. What brings you to our beautiful shores? Yeah.

Tracy Bongiorno 4:29

So the acquisition that I mentioned earlier, the company that acquired our small California startup, was originally based in Melbourne, and they expanded into the US, and they're the organisation that acquired us. And so we have an office in California and in Melbourne and in Seattle as well. So an opportunity arose in our Melbourne office, and I really wanted to be involved in that area of the business. Yes, it was a new team that we were building to take on a very important role in that that business.

Helga Svendsen 5:08

Amazing. We're very happy to have you here. So Excellent. All right, so as part of that, I know that you've been part of the different synchronicity and different opportunities. I know you've also been part of the WILD for STEM program, which is women in leadership development. It's a program. They've got a couple of programs, I think actually women in leadership development. There's the WILD program and there's WILD Board X, and as I understand it, you've been a participant in one, maybe both of those programs, and that involves encouraging, giving women the skills to get into the boardroom. So I would love to hear more about it. Tell us about first up, what the program is, which one you participated in, and then let's dig in around what that's all about.

Tracy Bongiorno 5:55

Yeah, I was a participant of the 2024 WILD for STEM program. This is a program that helps with the education and experience to get on a board role. So there's three main components to the program. One is the AICD course. The other aspect is a board observership, a short term board observership, and then a retreat where we do more workshopping and resume building and things like that.

Helga Svendsen 6:25

So you've done the company directors course through this program, and then you did an observership program. First up, just tell us. How did you know about the program? How did you end up doing it?

Tracy Bongiorno 6:33

I am pretty sure that I found out about the program through the Tech Leading Ladies community. And through that, I may have also seen it on LinkedIn, and so it popped up for women who have education and higher education in STEM which seemed like a great fit for me. I'd never considered being on a board as an occupation or an area of growth. So it was a great opportunity, and I applied, and fortunately, got into the program.

Helga Svendsen 7:04

So there's some learning through the Institute of Company Directors. There's a board observership component, and there's a retreat component. Tell us more in as much detail as you're able, tell us more about the board observership part of the program. Where did you do your observership? As I say, in as much detail as you're able to share. What did you observe? How did that play out for you?

Tracy Bongiorno 7:25

Yeah, so a colleague of mine, their relative, was a chairperson on a board, and they were gracious enough to support me in observing one of their board meetings.

Helga Svendsen 7:40

So does the program usually provide the board, or does the participant provide the board?

Tracy Bongiorno 7:46

In this case, the participant uses their network to find a board that they find interesting and would be happy to observe a board meeting.

Helga Svendsen 7:57

You're going to this board meeting to observe. How did you prepare yourself for it?

Tracy Bongiorno 8:01

Yeah, so I had a couple sessions with the person who was sponsoring me in the meeting. So the person who support knowing they shared with me a little bit about what was going to be discussed and what I could keep an eye out for. They also gave me a little bit of an assignment as to what I could do take notes on in the meeting, and then at the end of the meeting, they let me share my observations about that assignment that they gave me. So it was a pretty neat experience.

Helga Svendsen 8:34

Are you able to tell us broadly about what the assignment was? I love that that you were set for your observation.

Tracy Bongiorno 8:42

I was tasked with identifying areas where the board showed that they exhibited their values as a board, so I understood their values as a board and could pick out when things happened or people said things that were in support of those values.

Helga Svendsen 9:03

Interesting. Oh my gosh, that is so interesting to know that that's what the chair wanted you to focus on. I love that. I would say it's such a key thing for board directors to know the values of the organisation and to exhibit them in the boardroom, but it's not always done. So that is fabulous. Did they pass the test? Tracy, were you able to observe the values in practice?

Tracy Bongiorno 9:22

They did, yes. I noted quite a few for each of the different values, quite a few examples that they they showed.

Helga Svendsen 9:30

And then you reflected that back at the end of the meeting, did you to the board members?

Tracy Bongiorno 9:36

I did, yes. So for each of the values I shared, at least one example that I found.

Helga Svendsen 9:41

How fantastic. Okay, and then had you already done the company directors course, when you did the board observation?

Tracy Bongiorno 9:50

Yes, I did. So. I understood culture in the boardroom, and a bit about finance and legal and the various topics that the AICD course covers.

Helga Svendsen 10:01

So in that board observation, other than your assignment being set for you, I'm just wondering, having done the company directors course and then observing it live, did anything that stand out for you about that board practice? In practice, at least, is there anything you're able to share with us without revealing confidentialities. What else did you observe about board practice in practice?

Tracy Bongiorno 10:24

In a general way that I can share, there was some new regulation that had to come out, and so this was the first board meeting where they had started to discuss that regulation. And I found that really interesting. It it being something new that a board has to deal with or observe or govern. It was an interesting topic.

Helga Svendsen 10:48

And again, if you're able to tell us, I'm wondering, were you provided with the whole board pack prior to the board meeting, like all of the reading?

Tracy Bongiorno 10:55

No. So I just had easy access to a digital version that I sometimes scrolled through. It was hard to keep track like follow along, just because I wasn't familiar with the entire path. So I did my best.

Helga Svendsen 11:14

So then using that as part of the program. So you do the company directors, course, you observe a board meeting, and presumably different people learn different things from that, and then there's a retreat or an immersive at the end of it actually, how many are in the group when you're doing this program? How many are in the group?

Tracy Bongiorno 11:32

I believe it was about 25 of us that did the program in 2024.

Helga Svendsen 11:39

And you come together after you've done the company directors course, and the board observation is that right?

Tracy Bongiorno 11:44

Yes, the board observation could happen at any time. So the program ran from January till October, was when the board observership was due, in a sense, and the retreat happened in July, so it you could have done the retreat first, and then the board observership after.

Helga Svendsen 12:09

And are you able to tell us, in that retreat what, just what some of the things were that you covered off in that learning as well?

Tracy Bongiorno 12:16

Yeah, one of the workshops I remember that I really enjoyed was about executive presence, how to give meaningful presentations and talks, and how to plan them, and different tips and techniques on how to bring your best presence to any talk or or any meeting that you go to.

Helga Svendsen 12:38

Can you remember any of the tips from that that you might have then used?

Tracy Bongiorno 12:42

The facilitator or coach, she did provide a sheet that I have used since when giving some of my tech talks. So it's broadly speaking, it's sort of like rule of three. So you have three main things you want to get across, and for each of them, you say it, back it up, wrap it up. So to give credit for the say it, back it up, wrap it up. That is Sharon Longridge.

Helga Svendsen 13:11

Fantastic. Okay, so in 2024, you've done this program. It involves doing the company directors course. That involves this retreat, which covers all sorts of learning, like executive presence and you do a board observation. What's next for you, Tracy?

Tracy Bongiorno 13:31

Well, what's next for me is, I'd love to finding a board that I would feel really passionate about and matching the skills that they're looking to fill as well.

Helga Svendsen 13:41

And I should say, Tracy's joining the Take on Board KickStarter crew in 2025 to further her board intentions and her board, her board capability. And we're going to cover some of this in the program. But hey, you're on the podcast now, so why don't we share some of your incredible skills? What would you say are your three key skills for the boardroom?

Tracy Bongiorno 14:04

I would say risk and strategy. Would you call that one or two? I use risk skills in my day to day work career, looking for risk in business sense and technology sense in the day to day work that we do and then strategy, I look for ways that technology can help advance the business and give us better outcomes. And what would a third one be? I guess technology.

Helga Svendsen 14:35

So key skills around risk, strategy, technology, if you could snap your fingers and land in the boardroom of any organisation tomorrow, what would that organisation look like? What sector is it? What sort of boardroom would you want? Ideally want to land in?

Tracy Bongiorno 14:52

Yeah, so I would imagine it would be an organisation that's probably not too large. Research as it would be my first board role, I would need to build a bit more skills before I could take on, say, a listed company, board role sector. I'm not too particular about what sector, but I imagine it would need to be, bring my best and provide the best skill set for the organisation would need to be something where technology is quite relevant. So it could be a technology business, or it could be a technology adjacent business.

Helga Svendsen 15:29

It's hard to know what organisation is not, at least tech adjacent these days really like could be anything in there, okay, all right. Well, Take on Board community. If you're listening in, you're in a tech or a tech adjacent organisation. You're looking for somebody for your boardroom that's got

skills around risk strategy and tech. Of course, I was like, what's the third one? She said, risk, strategy and tech. Get in touch with Tracy. Her LinkedIn will be linked in the show notes.

Helga Svendsen 15:57

Why not get you a board role before you've even started Board KickStarter, Tracy, so that's the next step for you, is to build on this leadership experience that you've already got to leverage it into some board roles, and then leveraging those board roles up again. I just want to pivot to a slightly different topic, because you talked about tech. I talked about Tech Leading Ladies in your introduction, and you talked about it as being part of what got you into this program. You're one of the co-conveners. I think it's called of Tech Leading Ladies. What is Tech Leading Ladies? Let's do a little plug for them as well. Tell us about Tech Leading Ladies.

Tracy Bongiorno 16:35

So Tech Leading Ladies, we're a community of women and gender diverse individuals to help women and gender diverse individuals in technology in their leadership. So we're working to bridge the gap in gender diversity and technology leadership.

Helga Svendsen 16:55

I imagine that's quite the gap. Am I right in that?

Tracy Bongiorno 16:59

Yes, studies show that women in technology are promoted far less often and with less speed than men are. And you go to tech conferences and it's still very significantly men versus women, unless it's a you know, women and conference specifically.

Helga Svendsen 17:23

Oh, well, dare I say it, Tracy, you'll fit right into the boardroom, because even though great progress has been made in boardrooms in terms of gender equality, they're still not equal. So you'll feel, sadly, right at home coming from a male dominated world. I just want to switch back to the WILD for STEM program for a minute, just so people listening can get a little bit of an idea about it, just again, in as much detail as you're able to share, tell us about the sorts of other participants, like, what sort of background did they have? Where did they work? Like, who are the women and gender diverse people that participate in this WILD for STEM program?

Tracy Bongiorno 17:58

Yeah, because it was for men in STEM there were quite a lot of women from other science, women from biotech, women from chemistry, types of organisations, all sorts of sciences, even geology, civil engineering. So any science organisation there were, I think women representing all of them, as many as them I can think of.

Helga Svendsen 18:30

It must have been amazing, because I imagine all of those areas, the stem world broadly, is probably male dominated. Did you come into the, particularly the immersive together and kind of look around the room and go, oh my god, like we're all women. This is not what we're used to. How did it feel to be a stem space that was just for women?

Tracy Bongiorno 18:52

It's, it's actually quite freeing, in a way. When you're doing a workshop with 2025 other women, there isn't as much hesitation to speak out or fear of like you don't know what you're talking about. So I think the whole group was a lot more willing to be open, willing to be vulnerable and and all learn together.

Helga Svendsen 19:17

Do you recommend the program the WILD for STEM program?

Tracy Bongiorno 19:20

Definitely, it is a great program. It's got great objectives, and the women involved are all very accomplished in their careers and learning about what it means to be on a board and how they can improve their careers. So everyone is eager to help each other out and learn from each other.

Tracy Bongiorno 19:40

It was a really great course, the AICD course in particular, we had really great facilitators, and the retreat was really well put together, really worth the time and energy involved. And I really appreciate everything that the organisers and sponsors. Did for for that program, and are still doing

Helga Svendsen 20:03

amazing. Okay, so this has been a really great introduction to that program. I didn't know about it, I don't think until I spoke to you, and when I looked it up, I'm like, wow, this is an amazing opportunity, both for individuals who work in the STEM sector, but also, I think, for boards who operate in that sector to be part of the observership program. So we'll make sure we put a link in the show notes to the program. So just before we wrap it up, what are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Tracy Bongiorno 20:34

From my personal experience? I think it's important to take any opportunity that arises for you, if I hadn't taken an opportunity in a role that I had not expected, then I wouldn't do it. If you're interested in a program that you find that would be valuable for you, for personal reasons or for your career, then take a chance, apply if you get in you know, give it your best and learn from the experience.

Tracy Bongiorno 21:06

And find your people. Find a community where you feel comfortable, meet people in the community, go to meetups, go to conferences, expand your horizons, and you never know the next person you meet might be the best mentor you've ever had, or get you the greatest role you never thought you were looking for.

Helga Svendsen 21:27

Oh, amazing. Okay, well, I can imagine that the WILD for STEM people are now part of your community. Tech Leading Ladies is definitely part of your community, and we wholeheartedly welcome you to the Take on Board community as well.

Tracy Bongiorno 21:40

Thank you so much. Helga.

Helga Svendsen 21:41

Tracy, we normally share a resource with the Take on Board community, but this whole conversation has been the resource about the WILD for STEM program. So what we'll do is we'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes for people so that they can look up more about the program.

Helga Svendsen 21:57

Thank you so much for being open to the invitation to come and talk about this amazing program. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community, and I cannot wait to get started on the Take on Board KickStarter program with you a little later in the year. So thank you so much for being here with us today.

Tracy Bongiorno 22:15

Thank you. Helga. I'm very excited about the program, looking forward to it.

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