

Take on Board

Transcript – Victoria Crane



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Victoria Crane about the Board Observership program. First, let me tell you about Victoria. Victoria is the treasurer of Regional Arts Victoria and the secretary for the Learning for Life Autism Center. With a Bachelor of Commerce and a Bachelor of Laws with honors, Victoria originally practiced as a corporate solicitor before transitioning across to banking, holding various positions in ANZ, an institutional bank, family circumstances necessitated a career change, leading her to the not for profit sector. And she's now the general manager and board secretary of the learning for life Autism Center. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Victoria.

Victoria Crane 0:40

Thanks for having me, Helga.

Helga Svendsen 0:41

So Victoria, I am really keen to talk about the Board Observership program. But before we do that, as always, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me about your upbringing, and what lessons you learned what you've been up to, and what the leading influences were on what you thought and what you did?

Victoria Crane 1:00

Look, in some ways, I had a pretty standard upbringing. But in other ways, it was a little quirky, I suppose. My dad was very into projects, and would get involved in projects at home or generally in his life, you know, whether that was when, you know, decided to have trombone lessons at the age of 50. And he went and learned how to do stained glass windows at a random age. And, you know, he would get involved in those things. But one of his projects was buying a block of land in the halfway up in the high country, when I was two, I think my brother would have been about six months. And my sisters five or six, just bought a block of land in the middle of nowhere and took us all up there. It was a four-hour drive. And we didn't have a full drive car at that time. So it was a four drive track. And so we had to walk in for half an hour crossing these rivers. And you know, I think my mom was breastfeeding, my brother at that stage, I was on dead shoulders, walked into this block of land in the middle of nowhere. And he said, here we are, we camped out and dad ended up building this log cabin. And for years, this was our holiday house. And we'd go every holidays, you know, and

long weekends and all this sort of stuff. But I suppose our vices, because it was a pretty big impact on me as a person and our upbringing that this was this place in the middle of nowhere where we could just go and hang out and roam and swim in rivers and go off for the day and come back and eat lunch and go off for the day. And I suppose it was a really exciting place to be. But it also, you know, impacted the way I am in terms of independence and wanting to try things out and explore, and all those sorts of things. So I think that's had a pretty big impact on who I am and who I suppose my brothers and sisters are. Now today.

Helga Svendsen 2:36

Interesting when you started talking about that, that I hadn't realized how young like you on your dad's back, your mum breastfeeding like a baby. So you're both your parents are both carrying children, and presumably, whatever you needed to be in this block for however long you were staying there, so and you're camping, so they were carrying tents and food and sleeping bags and blankets.

Victoria Crane 3:01

If I've got three kids would I have been able to manage that when there was that little one, there's no chance I would have managed, I think mum just kind of went along with it. And when she got their foot off, what have we done, dad often had these crazy ideas, and mom would go along with it and support him. And I ended up you know, sometimes failing, sometimes working out, but this was one that was particularly special.

Helga Svendsen 3:23

And it's so interesting, you know, you you're giving that picture of, you know, swimming in the rivers and roaming around and that sense of independence. You know, for me, it's not quite how and walking in half an hour. But I grew up in Diamond Creek, and we're on this bush block. And, you know, there was disused gold mines and stuff down the back. And you know, like big holes in the ground and caves and all sorts of stuff. And I loved roaming around there. The train tracks down the bottom of the creek and all that sort of stuff. And you could just, you know, I think now kids, young kids roaming around and, you know, we used to cross the railway, the train track bridge over the creek, just like what were we thinking? But amazing adventures as well.

Victoria Crane 4:04

Yeah I think it really does teach you a lot of problem-solving and risk-taking skills, because you don't you need to learn at a young age, how to take risks, but how to take them, you know, sensibly and thoughtfully. And so it gave that environment where you could do that, you know, and sometimes we did get ourselves into a bit of trouble, you know, and there were a lot of snakes around. So, you

know, it wasn't all all safety first. But there was certainly so much to learn about that and to grow and to problem solve, which was pretty good

Helga Svendsen 4:32

Talking risk, talking growth, talking problem solving key things to take into the boardroom. So it's a beautiful little segue for us. So you participated in the board observership program, actually, what year did you do 2018?

Okay, so tell us what is the board observership program, maybe let's start there.

Victoria Crane 4:53

So the board observership program is basically where the organisation matches up observers. So candidates who want to experience a not for profit board with a not for profit board. So it's look, it's grown hugely. And there's a lot of boards involved. And I suppose from the observers perspective, it's about getting experience on a board, seeing how they run. And then from the board's perspective, it's about, you know, getting someone with a specific set of skills, or maybe a certain viewpoint outlook on your board, to have that sort of, you know, the benefit of those skills, and also to sort of get another perspective on your board. It's also a really great way to sort of think about your succession. But I know a lot of people, myself included, who have ended up on the board that they observed with, um, so it's like a really long interview process for both of you, because you get to work out whether you're interested, and the board can work out whether they, you know, you're the right fit for them.

Helga Svendsen 5:47

So that's the program, let's start at the start. How did you know about it, and had tell us about the application process? Like I would love to just walk through your experience of it? Sure.

Victoria Crane 5:55

So I found out about it just randomly from a friend. And when I was thinking about where I was in my career, and what I was looking for next, and thought, well, I might as well apply. There's no harm in applying, it is for under 40s. But I think there's been circumstances where they do take people who are over 40, but I think the idea is to try and build up a community of people who have this experience from a younger age. And so I applied, there's an online form that you fill in the whole lot of questions about yourself and about the selection criteria as to why you were appropriate for the board. At the time I applied, I don't know that they do it anymore, we had to do a video of ourselves, and submit that which I found very confronting, I'm not wanting to be in front of the camera. So I

found that quite confronting. So for me a bit of a challenge, but I did it. Then the observership program, they go through all the CVs they receive all the applications they receive, and shortlist people and conduct their own interviews, they're quite quick interviews, really, it's more of a get to know you see if you're the right kind of person. And then at the same time, the boards are giving information to the program saying these are the skill sets we're looking for. This is the kind of person we're looking for. And then what happens is Catherine, the observer, she program takes all that and basically matches up and then she'll send back anywhere from one three to maybe six CVs to the board and say, choose some of these to interview. So the boards get to choose who they interview, they interview, and then they let the observership program know who they would be they have a preference 123 or if there's one, or if there's none, and then the program matches you. So ultimately, the board doesn't get to select specifically who they want, it is a matching process. And I think that's done with the idea that they really want to have, you know, match up different boards with different people and not have the same board, everyone asking for the same person or, you know, they tried to make that a more fair allocation process. But if you're lucky, you get the person who you've selected. And some people might select the same people, some people might, some people might get off more than one board. That just depends how it works out. And you get placed.

Helga Svendsen 7:58

So who were you matched up with?

Victoria Crane 8:00

So I was mentioned up with Regional Arts Victoria. And I've got to say I was very lucky, because they are a fantastic organisation, but also a great board, a really a great mix of I suppose professionals who are bringing more the governance or specific finance or legal skills, for example, and then a mix of members, you know, creatives from across the state. And it's a really fantastic mix of people. And the board is really well really well governed.

Helga Svendsen 8:26

If your first experience is good governance. That is fantastic. Actually, it's interesting, I wonder, does the board observership program, test the organisations that come to them in any way?

Victoria Crane 8:37

Well they do in a sense, in that, you know, to put your hand up to be a board participating, you need to have a certain level of governance in place. And there's no testing per se that I know of, but what does happen is the there's a few things, so the each of the observers give feedback to the program on how the board's going. And the board gives feedback on the observer. So there's a sort of two way process and they do sort of monitor that situation. Likewise, that observer ship program

provides training through the AICD to all the observers, and that training is fantastic. But it's also a networking opportunity. Look, I think it's been harder for the last few years, because it was all online. But when I did it, it was face to face. And it was as much about networking with your cohort, as it was about the training and the theory behind it all. But that was you know, you had just sort of Chatham House rules in those training sessions, and people would talk about what was going on. And so there was examples of great governance, and there's examples of pretty poor governance. And it wasn't discussed in terms of breaching confidentiality, it was discussed in a way that, you know, it was more theoretical, but it was a really great, it's good to see the good and the bad, you know, because you learn from things that aren't quite so good. And so from that perspective, I suppose, boards aren't tested. But there is an opportunity to give feedback to say there's some things that you might want to work on.

Helga Svendsen 9:55

Presumably it's part of the value. I mean, there's obviously value to the participant in being involved because you get his insight into governance and you get to training. But there's value to the board as well, because they get the value of some of that training and insights coming back to the board as well.

Victoria Crane 10:08

Exactly. It's hugely valuable. I mean, with Regional Arts, we've had observed observers since myself, and each one of them have contributed in their own way. And been it's been beneficial process, and completely different skills. I think, one year we had someone who had mental health expertise, and it was it was, you know, fantastic. And she was really involved in looking at our occupational health surveys that we sent out and how we could improve those and how we could improve in mental health, you know, we've had someone with more risk experience, our observer, last year at has just been asked to join the board, you know, which is great, and that's helping with our succession planning, as well. And likewise, you know, Learning for Life, we had a bulletin board observer, last year, we've got a new one. And this year, we had our strategy day, just recently, and then you bought observer joined. And you know, his contribution was so great, particularly as a Learning for Life board, a lot of people on the board have been there for a long time. And they have great insights and great skills. But also, when you've all been on the board a while, you know, you sort of it can limit what you're thinking about, or how you see things. So to have this observer coming in Matt, and he's been great to come in and say, Oh, what about this? Or can you explain why you're doing this, you know, hugely beneficial.

Helga Svendsen 11:20

So Learning for Life, your work there at the moment, but you were initially on the board. So you do the board observership program at Regional Arts. And now somehow, you've ended up in the boardroom of Learning for Life. How did all of that happen?

Victoria Crane 11:33

So when I, when I did the observership program, I ended up taking a career break from work just for family circumstances. And one of those reasons was that my eldest daughter, who is autistic was going through early intervention program with Learning for Life, it was a game changer for us in terms of what they do. And I looked into it a bit more and realized, you know, when I first joined up with them, I didn't know that it was a not for profit in terms of when we signed up for the program. And when my daughter finished the program with them, I sort of looked into them more and thought, oh, maybe there's something I can bring to this, maybe, you know, they're not for profit, they're fundraising, they're trying to do all these great things, you know, maybe I've got some skills that can help out. So I contacted them and said, Look, I'm doing the observership program, I'd be interested in, you know, joining your board or helping out in some way. And from there, sort of joined a, subcommittee and joined, eventually came onto the board, and was on the board for a number of years. And when I got on that board, I realized, you know, they were doing really great things, but there was some improvements in terms of their governance. And I think that's pretty common when you have a grassroots organisation that's built up from a group of parents and professionals that get together and start this organisation. And as you've grown really quickly, and so doing lots and lots and lots. And so there was just a bit more that we could do in terms of the governance and the risk management perspective. So worked with the whole board and the board. were fantastic, because when I did raise, or there were some things we could do, you know, they were all yes, let's let's do it, how can we do it really enthusiastic. So we worked really hard, over a couple of years to just sort of finesse some of those things. And it got to the point where we realized we really did need an additional person in management, because the board was doing a lot of the stuff that it was too operational. And so we started to think, Okay, well, we need to get a general manager role in at the same time, I was actually finishing up my career break and looking to go back in to the paid workforce, and had been offered a role that was very similar to what we were looking for. And so I said, Well, you know, I'm gonna have to step off the board, because I can't just say, Well, I can't do this. So if you're interested, I'll take this role and join Learning for Life instead. So it kind of fell into place. From there.

Helga Svendsen 13:38

I'm just thinking timeline wise. So you did the board observership program? And 2018 did you say

Victoria Crane 13:43

Yep

Helga Svendsen 13:44

And then straight after that you joined? Did you go straight from being an observer to joining the board of Regional Arts? Yes,

Victoria Crane 13:50

Yes.

Helga Svendsen 13:50

So 2019, you step onto the board of Regional Arts? When did you join the board of Learning for Life?

Victoria Crane 13:58

2018 as well, so I hadn't finished the program and joined the board then. So I was then doing those both of those boards at the same time. And then, you know, I also took on a role as president of our local community kindergarten at the same time, which I thought would be, you know, I just want to get involved and, you know, be part of the community and, you know, support where my kids were going. Turns out, it's a bit more work than I'd anticipated. But once I was in there, I stuck around for a few years. And again, really, really great experience. You know, had I known when someone first said, you want to join the committee of management of the kinder, had I known how much work I would be doing as the president, I perhaps wouldn't have taken on at first, you know, first instance, but actually, the experience I got from that, particularly, you know, early child was a pretty highly regulated industry. And so there's some pretty good learnings to come out of that. But I suppose more so the friends you can make on those sorts of committees that are pretty special. And the influence you can have in the early childhood sector is also a great thing.

Helga Svendsen 14:58

Wow. So you had so I'm in 2018. If I've got my timelines right here, you were the board observer for Regional Arts, you were the president of the local kinder Early Learning Center. And you sometime during that year, you also joined the board of Learning for Life.

Victoria Crane 15:14

Yeah

Helga Svendsen 15:14

Yeah. Yeah. That that's quite the board portfolio.

Victoria Crane 15:18

People, say, Oh, what do you do for work, and I couldn't have been a consultant, because at the same time, it's all volunteer to. And so it's interesting how people look at that, because I suppose there was an ego element for me to have having been in this quite intense role and banking industry. And that, you know, sort of defined me as a person to then finding people say, what do you do? And I'd say, Oh, I'm just a consultant, because I didn't know how to explain it. And because it's not paid. How you talk through that is a tricky one.

Helga Svendsen 15:47

I often have conversations with people on the whether that are paid not for profit directors or not is such a interesting area, I think I've moved, my view has always been paid. But I'm think I'm moving even slightly from that. It's interesting, because directors whether you're paid or not, doesn't change your responsibilities and your obligations, you can still lose your house, you can still be sued, you can still, you know, you've got all of the obligations. So you know, you had a portfolio career from that moment, even though it wasn't a particularly well paid portfolio career, what often what people aspire to, it's just I want to build up the portfolio. And you did it in that 12 months, which is Yeah, which is really interesting. I'm wondering then about the other people that participated in the board observership program, was that common amongst your cohort? You know, that building of the portfolio that you did, did others do similar?

Victoria Crane 16:38

I don't know how many there were. But I know that there were quite a few that then either took on board roles or subcommittee roles. In fact, just out of the blue, one of the participants in my cohort contacted me know, what is it for years now? And said, Oh, look, I noticed that we're both in the same sector now doing a similar role, can we catch up and chat just to talk through some of the issues, the challenges that we're both sort of facing at work, so caught up with him, and he's also joined the board that he was observing with then still with him a few years later. And we were both sort of reflecting on what a valuable experience that had been,

Helga Svendsen 17:12

Either for you or for him, you've now on the board of that organisation? So Regional Arts, you're now on no longer the board observer, but the board member, that organisation still participates in the board observership program? Have you flipped to you now, the board liaison?

Victoria Crane 17:26

No, I'm not. I'm not, I think, our chair and CEO, or the board liaison, but yeah, it's still really interested every time we have an observer come through and keen to speak to them and hear their insights.

Helga Svendsen 17:37

And so back to when you do the matching process, you're on the regional arts. Tell me about the induction process? How did you then step into that organisation? How did you know what was going on? How were you introduced to meetings? How were you introduced to your role as the board observer?

Victoria Crane 17:52

Well, they really induct you, this is what we're after. And this is what we do at Learning for Life as well induct you as if you're a board member. And then both organisations have been very similar in the sense that we say to an observer, we're going to treat you as a board member, please act like a board member, you just don't have a casting vote. Yeah. And so you know, and that's what we do. And so we have the usual induction process, and they'll, they'll be provided with some past papers, they'll come in, and they'll be provided with an information pack about the organisation about policies, those sorts of things. They come in and spend a morning or a day, depending on the circumstances, and meeting, you know, the management team and talking through the different programs that are offered things like that, it's usually kicked off with a strategy day of some sort or first board meeting for the year.

Helga Svendsen 18:38

And so for you, I mean, like I say, you built your board portfolio pretty quickly in that year, but what was the value that you got from the program?

Victoria Crane 18:47

You know, I thought I sort of had an idea of governance, and you know, certainly the fundamentals behind it of risk management, and those sorts of things I had through my professional career. But I think I really got a lot out of RAV in terms of the way they went about things, and just some of the systems in place. So things like, you know, having the board calendar in place, how agendas sort of set up and why certain processes happen, that was really helpful. But also looking at it from the perspective of what is the board members role. And for me, that was that was a big shift of reading things and sort of asking about them, rather than trying to do the doing, or rather than trying to find

the solution, putting it back to management to do that. But asking them why and investigating and those sorts of things. That sort of changing mindset was a big thing for me. But it also really helped me in a management position to think about how do I need to put in this report, you know, how are they going to perceive it? And how am I going to get the answer I want? What do they need to know? And knowing that they are going to want to ask questions, because that's the thing when you're on a board, you do want to ask questions, this in some sense to show that you actually read it, but also to sort of test the boundaries of it, to check that it is robust, so Then putting my management hat on. Okay, well, how do I want to? How's the audience going to receive this? How do I want to write it, I want to make it easy to read, I want to make it, you know, not too long and unwieldy. But I need to get to the point and give them the information they need, but also make it clear that I have the answers to their questions.

Helga Svendsen 20:16

It's interesting is that most management team people that are reporting to board, they're happy to have conversation about it. You know that nope, no questions. It's like, oh, what do you mean no questions like it's, it's a good thing to question. But you want to give the right level of information. So they can ask the questions that need to be asked rather than the, the surface level type stuff. So that's interesting. So for you, it was a learning about governance, which you would expect would be an outcome of the board observership program. But it sounds like it was more than that. It was not just in that other role. It also gave you different insights into your day to day job as well

Victoria Crane 20:52

Yeah, yeah, it definitely did. And, look, I certainly think that the skills and experience I'd gained from the observership program certainly came across into when I was on the board and learning for life. But also now in my current capacity, and especially, I suppose, being Secretary because a lot of you sort of responsible for ensuring the governance, risk management processes are in place and are working and are ongoing and are lived rather than just in theory.

Helga Svendsen 21:17

You've touched on this both, I think, with Learning for Life and with Regional Arts Victoria, but so the value to you was learning about governance, you know, learning more about the organisation, and that learning for your day to day job. What's the value for organisations to participate in the board observership program? What did you observe about regional arts? Or what have they told you about regional arts that was a value in terms of their participation?

Victoria Crane 21:41

Look, I think it's getting that other perspective is really helpful. So it's almost like you get the outsider perspective in a meaningful way, you get another skill that you might be missing. So if you're looking at your board matrix, and going, Oh, geez, we really don't have elite, anyone with legal skills in this and we need them, it's a great way to bring that skill set in. And you know, you might only need, you might have a project, that's a significant project in your organization, and you need someone with certain skills, and you don't need them forever. You think, oh, we've got this on. Actually, if we could get an observer in, that'd be really valuable with those skills, you know, maybe it's a specific IT project or something to do with marketing, get that person in with those skills, it's a great way to bring a specific skill set in. Likewise, you might be looking at diversity and say, Look, we're bunch of white women on this board, we need to get someone else in those sorts of things to, I think that's really beneficial. And then related to that is the potential for board succession. And particularly in the not for profit sector, board succession can be much trickier, because it is a volunteer role. Being able to plan that out and work with the observer and have that long interview is really helpful.

Helga Svendsen 22:46

Actually had of interest. Do you know if there was any observers offered? Because it's the long interview from both sides? Each side gets to check it out? Any observers offered a role in the boardroom after the program? Who said no?

Victoria Crane 22:57

I don't know of any specifically, but I imagined it would be. And I think that might not be because the board wasn't a good board. But because you do have to really care about the purpose. And you don't always get matched with the specific purpose that you would have chosen. So I know, for example, at RAV. You know, we hadn't even got to the point of would we wouldn't be appoint one of our observers, but I know she was offered a board role towards the end of her program at I can't remember what it was, it was a not for profit, legal service of some sort, or something like that. Yeah, a really great, great organisation. And so, you know, had we asked to, or had, we got to the point of saying, Would you like to join, she may well have taken that instead, anyway, because that was something she really cared about. So I think there probably has been, and for various reasons as to why someone might not have joined the board. And likewise, someone might have had a great experience, think it's great, but just not have the capacity to take it on. Because I think that's another thing that I think observers do realize is that you think are great, Yep, I'll do all this. But then they find that with their full time job, or with their job, or their family, or whatever else they have, it's another commitment. And you do have to commit you do it's, it's, you know, and if you can't, if you're finding that you're just not making board meetings, if you don't have time to read the papers, then is that the right thing for you to be doing in that point of view.

Helga Svendsen 24:18

Because as we said before, it doesn't matter whether you're paid or not, you've got the same obligations, you can lose your house, whether you're the president of the local kindergarten, or the chair of BHP, like it doesn't matter. You've got the same responsibilities.

Victoria Crane 24:33

And I remember at one of the observership functions, they always have an introduction evening at the start to meet everyone. And we had a speaker and it's terrible. I can't remember her name. She's fantastic. But she mentioned that and she's a, you know, a career director. And she has a number of boards and I remember quite clearly her saying that her most stressful times but best times have been on the nonprofit boards in the sense that you know, they're not from Profit boards don't have the resources often Yeah, that, you know, they're big corporates do. And so when there's a crises, it really hits the board. And you have to step in. And it can be quite time consuming from that perspective,

Helga Svendsen 25:13

I've been on a not for profit board before where we needed to seek legal advice as the board and we had to tip in the finances for that as a board. It ended up getting repaid and so on. But at the time, we're like, we need our own legal advice. And we are going to tip in to do that so that we can feel assured that things are working the way they should work. So yeah, it's an it is a big commitment, or in all ways of time of energy of interest. And sometimes, it's a commitment of finances rather than an earning of finances. Oh, Victoria, so many awesome things covered in this conversation. And I and the board observership program is such a great program for organisations. And I should say it's not just not for profit organisations, one of my boards this year on two vic gov boards, and one of those is participating in the program. So there's an increasing number of government boards that are also participating in the program, which is great. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Victoria Crane 26:12

Oh, look, I think the first would be to give things a go, you know, I sort of fell into this. And I've always been someone who just gives things a go. And I think that comes back to you. And we were talking about when I was a kid and how, you know I how my parents encouraged me to just Okay, give it a go, you know, try these things. If you fail, you fail. So what So I think from that perspective, it's really worthwhile, try it out. But then I'd caveat that with, at the same time, if you are going to join a board, do your research on that board. Because as we talked about, there is responsibilities that go with that. You can interview the board, just like they might interview you that much like you would a job, find out what it's all about. And I think the other thing would be the importance of really caring about the purpose of the board that you're on, you're going to enjoy it a lot more and

be a lot more effective. You know, you've got to align with the values and you've got to care about the purpose, particularly when we're talking not for profits. So I think they're probably two key things I, I'd say about boards and not for profits.

Helga Svendsen 27:13

Great advice. And I would actually say that alignment with purpose and values, it's all organisations. It doesn't matter whether it's BHP, ANZ Bank, whatever technology company or a not for profit, it's that alignment is really key. Yeah, excellent advice. Is there a resource you would like to share with the take on board community?

Victoria Crane 27:33

Our CEO at Learning Life, Pam Roy, she sent me a YouTube clip one afternoon and said like this, this is great. And it was documentary series, One Plus One that featured Peggy O'Neal from the Tigers, CEO of the chair of the tiger, sorry. And it was really looking at the Tigers. This is AFL footy, sort of rise to where they were to them when they won the Premiership. And I really liked her insights. But in particular, I loved when he talked about, you know, they knew they had the right coach. And they knew that they had to ignore all the outside noise and just go along with their strategy and what they had decided to do. So I'd recommend that episode.

Helga Svendsen 28:13

Mm hmm. I'm going to look at that and it's reminded me I would love to get Peggy O'Neal on the Take on Board podcast so so it's reminded me to go and check the tree for a few connections and see whether I can get Peggy to spend some time with me on this podcast. So thank you, I'm gonna look at that and if anyone out there and take on board land, if you've got Peggy's number let me know. Victoria, thank you such a great conversation because the board observership program is fantastic. Everyone out there and Take on Board land, please consider if you're under 40 participating in the program. There's other programs that are have some sort of similar bent to the board observership program as well. So look for these sorts of programs that can give you the the learning and the experience in that safe environment so that you can then go on and make and build your governance portfolio exactly like you have Victoria. So thank you so much for sharing with the take on board community today.

Victoria Crane 29:09

Thanks for having me.