



Take on Board

Transcript – Emily Moore

Helga Svendsen 0:00

So Today on the Take on Board podcast, Helga's speaking with Dr. Emily Moore about being an effective board member and the role of a board in a crisis. First, let me tell you about Emily. Emily is on the boards of Metrolinks, which is a provincial crown corporation providing regional commuter rail and bus services for Toronto and Chemtrade logistics, a Toronto Stock Exchange listed industrial chemical organization. She's also finishing up on Heltek Regional innovation, not for profit, and she's formerly been a director of St. Mildred lightboard school, Canadian society for chemical engineering, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the committee for research partnerships. Emily is a professional engineer, professor and board member working at the intersection of technology and business and education. After more than 20 years in industry, she is now director of the Troost Institute for leadership education in engineering at the University of Toronto. Welcome to the take on board. podcast, Emily.

Emily Moore 1:01

Great, thanks. So pleasure to be here.

Helga Svendsen 1:03

So Emily, before we explore further about governing in a crisis, I would love to just dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me what was young Emily like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up as a board director?

Emily Moore 1:18

So young Emily was the stereotype we don't say bossy anymore. We say, leadership potential, like I was born in charge, I was the oldest of three, I had two younger brothers who I loved organizing, and I loved organizing fairs or garage sales, or whatever it might be that I loved organizing, and that went all the way through school student politics, and always was that leader with a capital L wanting to make a difference, strong sense of duty, but also a strong sense that I had a really good idea of what I want to get done and tended to be putting myself in places to get that done. And so That started very, very early for me and went all the way through school through uni, doing student government and things. So I always had our a lot of energy for leadership. And my first inkling that I would be on a board, I don't think I really even knew what boards were until I was working so had matured and calmed down a little bit. And had always been involved in a lot of volunteer things. And so my girls

school that I had gone to as a child and had been the head girl of after I done my PhD, and I was back working in research, they invited me to join the board. And so my first board was being on a volunteer board. And I really went in with not a great sense of what was involved in being a board. And that's really where I learned about that concept of governance and all those pieces.

Helga Svendsen 2:49

It's interesting to hear that that school board and even I think you said you're on some of the student governance organizations as well, so that rolling governance can extend way back so were you when you were on those student governance.

Emily Moore 3:02

So I was head girl at I guess 16 / 17. And then when I was in university, I got involved pretty quickly on faculty Council. So that would be setting policy for the faculty. I was a student rep on that. And then on sort of the Student Government board in various positions, and finally was the president of the university student government to my final year. So all the way through, I was involved in i saw i would have interacted with the board of Queen's University where I went, but I didn't really understand the governance role that they played, per se. I did more on the faculty side. But on the the governing board, I think I saw it as more of an advisory board, even though actually, like many boards, they were in charge of hiring the principal. So they had that same sort of, you know, higher the CEO role.

Helga Svendsen 3:50

Thinking about those different roles that we have and what the governance experiences that we get from them, often people downplay them, whereas in fact, they are some incredibly valuable governance concepts and subjects and so on that you deal with it in those organisations.

Emily Moore 4:05

Absolutely. And I think well, certainly the private school board and the University board, the people that I was serving on the board with, at the time, I don't think I realized how impressive they were. But they were, you know, very significant people in Canadian business. And so I got to know people and build relationships with people that are, you know, still at the top of the Canadian business establishment. And at the time, I was, you know, a student to was mostly just wanting to challenge things on that board. But they gave me great advice and great mentorship over the years. Some of them I'm still in touch with today. But now I look back and I think, oh, my goodness, I had no idea how impressive these people were.

Helga Svendsen 4:46

Great training ground. Well, it's interesting, I think is often you know, when you've had more experience, and then you see young people coming through, and you can say those that have got that spark or that you know, just that thing governance and leadership and so on. So you're probably doing exactly the same. I'm guessing for some of the younger people who are coming through the system now and and giving them a bit of a hand up as well.

Emily Moore 5:09

Yeah, certainly through the institute that I'm a part of now at the university. It's, it's really exciting because I get to work with students who are leading their clubs, leading their organisations, but then also going and representing at faculty Council. So I'm now at faculty council with young Emily's coming in and making the same mistakes, but also learning the same lessons that I learned. And it's been pretty exciting to see them stepping up in their passion. And you know, the youth always have passion, which is so great.

Helga Svendsen 5:38

And I heard he never said that you're, you know, the oldest of three. And I'm just wondering that whether that eldest child still plays out now as an adult, still play out with your younger brothers did you say?

Emily Moore 5:50

Two younger brothers, yeah, my husband is the youngest of four. And so we say that we're the perfect couple because I'm used to bossing people around and being ignored. He's used to being bossed around but ignoring and and so neither of us gets all that upset by the you know, we're kind of in that same dynamic. So my brothers have gone on to be incredibly accomplished. So they don't need a whole lot of advice for me. And it's been kind of neat especially, actually, in some of my board work. My brother is a corporate lawyer. And so I've actually called him up for advice as I've been trying to sort out whether to go on to a certain board or certain I get involved in a certain action and he's been able to give me coaching and advice. So it's been nice to have that equals finally..

Helga Svendsen 6:35

You know, as the youngest in my family, I can tell you there was great joy when one of my older sisters was finally referred to as Oh, you're helping your sister rather than me always being or your Ingrid's sister, your Kirsten's sister. So yeah, I get without that flip around comes sometimes there is great joy for the youngest. So, so we're recording this on the 28th of April 2020. And you're in

Toronto. I'm in Melbourne. Australia. I'm wondering if you can just tell us what's the state of play at the moment for where you are in relation to COVID-19? Because it is a topic, obviously on everyone's lips at the moment.

Emily Moore 7:11

Absolutely, yeah. So yeah, I'm in Toronto, Ontario, Ontario is the largest province in Canada and Toronto is the largest city in Canada. And so I should know the population off the top of my head, but I want to say Toronto was probably about an 8m / 9m in the Greater Toronto area population and, and the province has probably been another 50%. On top of that, we're doing okay, we are at the peak of the curve, and we think we're starting to come down, but we've had 1500 cases in Ontario and the number of deaths is high. So we're at about 900. And we are still having new cases every day. And so while we are near the top of that peak, we want to get fewer cases obviously coming in. So the the premier today was talking about opening up. But we are still weeks away from any relaxation on the lockdown that we're under, we are able to go out and walk around a little bit outside, but the parks are all closed all the grocery stores, you know, I think very similar to what you're experiencing in Australia. But certainly the numbers are bigger. And we're also Ontario is right next to Michigan and New York, which are, of course, two of the most effective states in the US. And so we are in there's a lot of cross border traffic, typically between the two countries, that's very much shut down except for essential services back and forth. It's something that we are watching and waiting for, especially in New York to get their situation under control.

Helga Svendsen 8:46

As you said, it sounds similar in some ways in terms of the restrictions. touchwood fortunately for us in Australia, we've managed to scorch the curve pretty effectively, although watch this space for when some of the restrictions start lifting and then what happens so we're all in a bit of a state of uncertainty, I think across the globe. So then I'm wondering with COVID-19, part of our conversation today is about governing in a crisis. How is this playing out for you in your boardrooms. And in fact, if you can tell us just a little bit about the organization's that you're on and how it's playing out in the boardroom for you.

Emily Moore 9:19

So I'm on the board of two very different organisations, or actually three very different organisations. The largest organisation is metrolinx, which is the regional rail and bus service. And that has been fascinating to be a part of the COVID 19 has huge impacts on transit and huge exposure to transit. And so metrolinx we have a fantastic CEO who organised his team very early on, to have a crisis response and has actually been incredibly proactive, and I would say has been leading a lot of the other organizations in Ontario in many ways around the way that they have been dealing with things they've been getting involved in helping the government with procurement, those sorts of things. And so that board COVID-19 has a huge operational issue for us. The

organisation also oversees major construction projects for transit. And so that is another dimension construction projects have been deemed an essential service. And so they are still running. And so the safety of the people on the construction sites, as well as the operators that are getting those essential service workers to work has been really, really, really important. And as a board member, it's been interesting because we have been getting almost daily briefings from the CEO on what is happening and the actions that they're taking. But for the most part, we're there to be cheerleaders right now, we're not there to get into the operational decisions. We are there to ask a few questions, but I would say that we are very much being led by the CEO and appropriately So, as we come out of this and start to work with the CEO, as they're making more and more strategic decisions coming out of this transit, ridership is down, like 90%. The discussions we've been having at the board is what does that curve look like coming out of it? Where are the places we can be saving money? We have not announced any layoffs, thankfully, because we need everybody to get everything back up and running as we come. But that is a concern. How long can we go at sort of 10% ridership and how quickly will that recover? And we just no one has a crystal ball. And I think there's some really difficult strategic decisions on how we are going to be able to manage this going forward, being a crown Corporation, our shareholders, the provincial government. And so that's also very interesting because obviously the provincial government, as I'm sure in Australia, you've seen similar things the government has been doing a lot of things to keep People at work. And so they want to maintain the workers in in the system so that the combat can be as quick as possible. So the decision making is not really just the organizations or the boards but very much in consultation with the government. So that's quite interesting. The dynamics and and understanding how that will all play out. But I think it will be a really fascinating, ongoing conversation and the changes to normal operation around safety. And luckily, the the organisation has had a very strong safety culture. And so the number of infections has been extremely low within the population of our staff, but what are those things going to be going forward? And so how are we taking care of our people and our customers is a huge conversation. The other two boards that I'm on are different. So Chemtrade logistics is an industrial Chemical Company. It has a number of sites, which tend for the most part to be in smaller towns sort of away from Main center with one or two exceptions, we're supplying chemicals into water treatment. So that's relatively stable. But then we're also supplying chemicals into markets that are like oil and gas that are all over the place right now. And so we actually had to suspend our guidance, because the CEO and his CFO and all of his team have been working extremely hard to try and understand what's happening. But being able to predict through the full year has proven virtually impossible. There's just so many changes. And what I have found really fascinating is I'm relatively new to this board, but the way that the entire economy and supply chain is so interconnected, because we feed into pulp and paper, so pulp and paper is having a bit of a boom, because we have all the toilet paper that we're using and all the disposable masks that we're using and all of the you know, the PPE that's paper based. So that is actually the chemicals we supply into that industry, there's a lot of demand. Whereas oil and gas where things are, you know, really being dialed back, things are really slow. And so trying to balance across that portfolio and be able to predict what's going to happen and what timeline. Having settled that we are still running. All of our factories are running, we are managing safety we are managing, we've had a couple of instances where people have tested positive with COVID. We've had to shut down temporarily a few of our smaller facilities, but we've been able to bounce back and and in terms of our operational challenges, those are low. It's more market management challenges. So quite different than the metrolinx example. Now the third board is a not for profit, that supports new startup companies in our region. And they basically

gone from it's all about bringing everybody together and putting them in the room and sharing knowledge to how do we do this first. Truly. So there's been a huge pivot in their delivery method. And we just had our board meeting last week, and the CEO has done a fantastic job in pivoting. And our role as a board has been to look at some of the financial risks as sponsorship, and some of the funding may be less available. So what are the hard decisions? So we basically had a COVID version of the budget, which was kind of our worst case scenario and debated do we sort of go with our budget as usual, or the COVID budget, and we approved the COVID budget for the year saying, like, if we outperform the budget, fantastic, but let's go with the most conservative so the conversations have been different at all of them. But what I would say is that in all three, the CEOs are driving and the CEOs are doing a fantastic job, and then communicating frequently with the board about the decisions that they're making. And the role of the board has been to ask good questions, to make sure that we understand what's happening. But for the most part to be offering our support, and to be cheering the team on and getting out of the way, and making sure that we're getting enough reporting, but not bogging them down.

Helga Svendsen 16:11

So I'd love to dig a bit further into that cheerleading role. It's a beautiful way of putting it and I'm thinking, you know, firstly, often as directors and as people, not just as directors of organizations, but as people when a crisis comes, we have that urge to get our hands dirty, and to get in and find everything out. So as directors, I think what I'm hearing is we need to resist that sometimes a little bit in these sorts of circumstances. So two things. One, I'm wondering how you manage your own urges in that way to get your hands dirty. And secondly, I'm also wondering in your role as a cheerleader for these fabulous CEOs who are just getting on and doing the work. I imagine for a lot of CEOs, they are used to knowing what is happening, and being the expert and being able to really predict and go here's what I think was Do here's my recommendation. At the moment, so many things are uncertain. It's very hard to have firm predictions about anything. So I'm wondering how your role as cheerleader is supporting them in a time when they are also working with so much uncertainty and not knowing what's going on.

Emily Moore 17:17

So I think there's two things. One is my own. I'll tell you about a conversation I had with the chair of one of my boards, who actually called all of us just to check in and say, how are you doing? And I said, You know, I feel like, this is such a crisis, I should be doing something. And that's my instinct is to say, you know, what can I do? And yet, my rational side is saying, you know, there's really nothing we can do right now other than pay attention, be we're all reading, we're all sharing information. And he said, Absolutely. 100% exactly right. We don't want to bog the team down and we want to be able to give them our advice and bring up expertise. So the various board tables has been really interesting to see which expertise is most helpful. So in some cases, right now, financial expertise is highly valuable, as always is on a board. But understanding of the government programs that are available and whether or not we should be tapping into those for some of my ports, that's very relevant in others, especially for something like metrolinx, the political, the people on the board that

kind of understand the political decision making and the political stresses is also very interesting and important. And so that was, those are important voices. And so what's been interesting is that all of those voices have always been there. And all of those pieces of expertise have been there, but slightly different people are speaking up right now. And certainly the emphasis is different and the CEO can be best supported by bouncing ideas. None of us know, but the accepted wisdom around the table. What do you think? So one of the conversations at metrolinx was, what do people think? Are people going to get back on the train? When this is over? Or how long is that going to take to recover? Are people going to be in their cars? Because they don't want to get onto public transit? How much do we think that the work from home thing is going to stick? And the feedback from most of the people on the board is that yes, there will be probably be some change, some slowing, but the regional growth in our area is significant. And people like to be together. And so that over time, we do believe it's going to recover and the growth pattern of Ontario is going to continue, which means the growth pattern for metrolinx is going to continue as well. And so but that was the kind of strategic longer term, and it was a place that I think the CEO could have those conversations and get the kind of collective wisdom of the people around the table, which helps them to sort of recenter them selves in their day to day decision making that they're doing all the time.

Helga Svendsen 20:04

Because, of course, you know, whilst are presented as a question, and in terms of the CEO always knows what's going on, and they're the expert. Of course, that's not the way in business at anytime. And at the moment, it is just exacerbated or accentuated through a period of extreme uncertainty. But I guess in some ways, that's always there with any challenge in any organization. It's hard to predict the future.

Emily Moore 20:26

Yeah, absolutely. And, and a lot of it is I mean, I do believe that quite often, and certainly, in my case, all three of the CEOs, they do know their business better than anybody on the board. I mean, they are experts in their business. But sometimes there is that need to take a step back. And I think that's what the board allows them to do. And there are times that we ask questions that are kind of dumb, and but it's good to, you know, to think about, like how we thought about this, and probably the CEO has thought about it 100 times, but there is no such thing as a dumb question and this is the kind of time When you actually want to be challenging some of the assumptions, so one of my good friends, has been doing some very interesting work on strategy in a time of crisis. And we just had a strategy meeting for metrolinx. I thought, Oh, I'm surprised we're not canceling that. But actually, these are strategic decisions that we're taking right now. Because you are thinking about what is it going to be like in six months or a year while you're making the day to day but you want to know where you're trying to get back to, so that you don't actually inadvertently make a strategic decision by default. So it was it's quite interesting to think about every decision is actually, especially in a time of crisis is often a strategic decision.

Helga Svendsen 21:41

So that is fabulous advice for boards around COVID-19. So I just want to switch tracks just a little bit, because I understand you had an interesting experience, shall we say, when you're on the search committee at one of your former boards, St Mildred, can you tell us about that?

Emily Moore 21:57

So I was an old girl. I don't They call us old girls anymore. But so I graduate of a school and had been on the board for a few years. And they were beginning a principal search. And I was asked if I would chair the hiring committee for the principal. And I said, Yes, because I was pregnant, and figured I'd have tons of time, as I had my third child who was on maternity leave, it was a great time to take on a principal search, not really thinking through the logistics. And so when we were doing the interviews, I was nursing My child, and we would do the interviews, and then my husband would show up with my three children, and hand me the baby so that I could nurse her in between the interviews. And so this principle search was absolutely tied in with my daughter, Christine. In some ways, it was great because it kept my brain going and it kept me you know, focused on learning and I really enjoyed the principal search and I think that's where I really We saw that the principal is the CEO of a school and what is it that we're asking for, but also what a strategic decision that kind of a hire is for a board. And so it's such an important part. And it was a huge honor to be to be chairing that committee. And I learned a lot in that, but I did it. Yeah, I did it nursing every couple of hours that my husband would show up with a hungry baby. And I think it was it was good, it kept me kept me very grounded as well.

Helga Svendsen 23:29

Oh, Emily, there have been so many fabulous little pearls of wisdom in here for a take on board community. So I'm wondering what are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Emily Moore 23:42

When I think about the managing in a time of crisis, but really being part of any board, you really need to think about what it is that you as an individual are bringing, and know that you're part of a suite of individuals with different expertise. A good board has a mission. mix of people with governance knowledge, people with legal knowledge, people with financial knowledge, people with technology, knowledge, all these different pieces. And for me, I think one of my lessons of being on a board from that head girl type that I was at that, you know, as a young person was realizing that I didn't need to know it all I needed to show up and bring what I had to the conversation and whether that's dealing with COVID, or whether that's dealing with any other part of the business. I think that's the most important thing is to own your expertise, Own your competence, but also have respect and create time and trust for the expertise and the competence of the other people on your

board. And that will be a great functioning board. You're going to learn a huge amount from being at that table. But know what your contribution is going to be to that whether it is chairing the committee with a baby at your breast or whether it is bringing in a technological device. discussion on, on how we might pivot a business?

Helga Svendsen 25:04

And is there a results that you might like to share with the take on board community.

Emily Moore 25:08

One of my good friends is a woman named Rebecca Southern who is an excellent facilitator. And she's been posting some really great little videos on LinkedIn about this strategy in a time of crisis, and especially for not for profits. That's where she tends to do most of her consulting. And she talks a lot about these strategic decision and sort of challenging yourself to be thinking strategically, even in the midst of this. And so she's a great resource.

Helga Svendsen 25:34

Yeah, fantastic. We'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes so people can access it as well. And thinking about, you know, the take on board community, people are listening to this podcast. What do you suggest is the first step for somebody listening to this podcast? What's an idea for action? What should they be doing?

Emily Moore 25:52

Doing a little inventory of what it is that you're bringing? If you're not on a board? It's extremely important, you know, what is the value that you hold? To bring in that you think you can bring, if you're already on a board, checking in and seeing, am I bringing the value I thought I was going to bring? Or is there something else that's emerging in the way that I'm interacting in the board and being really aware of that value that you're bringing? Or maybe you need to be bringing more value? Maybe Where do I need to educate myself because there's a gap on the board. But doing that inventory, I think is a really important part of your own continual development, but also will help you to be a stronger contributing board member and get help from other board members on what they how they think you're doing, and where they see you contributing or from your friends, people that you work with. because quite often, you'll start to recognize things you didn't even know that you were bringing, as you get into these conversations, and most people who are on boards, I hope all people who are on boards come with considerable expertise. But sometimes when something has become easy for you, you start to devalue it a little you think Well, everybody must have this If you kind of are reflecting on the conversations, you start to realize, Oh, I knew something or I had some expertise and knowledge that the rest of the team didn't have I actually contributed something

that's interesting that I'm bringing something that I didn't think was that valuable. But maybe that is of more value. So I think that's something that I'm always doing. I'm always reflecting on what it is that I'm bringing to the table.

Helga Svendsen 27:23

Yeah, fantastic. And it's a it is a great thing to do ongoing because you sometimes forget as well. So if you keep your little list of accomplishments and reflect back on it, you're like, Oh, yeah, that thing in 2015. I forgot I'd even done that. So it is a fantastic thing to do. The reflection and and remembering on those things. Oh, Emily, it's been fantastic to have you on the podcast today. So many valuable things for people to consider. Not just in a COVID-19 crisis, but crises in the future or in dating governance in general, and the role of the board. So thank you so much for being on the take on board podcast today.

Emily Moore 27:56

Great. It was fun. Thanks so much.