



Take on Board

Transcript – Leesa Chesser

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board Podcast, I'm speaking to Leesa Chesser about the Australian Institute of Company Directors Chairs mentoring program about why advisory boards are a great way to build your portfolio career and no doubt many other things that we'll touch on because we've had a bit of a pre chat. And we've got a lot of things to talk about. First, let me tell you about Leesa. Leesa is a non executive director and mentor who builds and chairs advisory boards for startups, SMEs, not for profit organizations and social enterprises to create value in the Health and Human Services, infrastructure, defense and space industries. She's on the boards of community options Australia, hen house cooperative, limited and chairs or sits on several advisory boards in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide, in the startup space social enterprises and the GOGO foundation. Welcome to the Take on Board Podcast, Leesa.

Leesa Chesser 0:53

Thanks for having me.

Helga Svendsen 0:54

It is fabulous to have you here and fabulous to be face to face recording. Before we talk about advisory boards and the chairs, mentoring program and all of those things. Let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Leesa that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Leesa Chesser 1:15

Always had a fascination for current affairs and as a kid when you had show and tell in year one, and everyone was bringing their favorite toys I've watched like Today Tonight or something on ABC the night before and I wanted to talk about the female unique and Germaine Greer. And everyone just stared at me like I was weird. And that sort of theme of understanding and being aware of my environment as an only child growing up with media around me is something that I've always been responsible and a decision maker I was scout and a guide and then ended up in Bjelke-Petersen Queensland at uni. Mm hmm. And the radio station at University of Queensland was taken over by Young Nats. And for me that was even though I only periodically listened to for two episodes, it was a pivotal moment about censorship and student led governance and governance and decision making thread, again, and leadership's are around for business faculty, Queensland University of

Technology, which was next to the Queensland parliament, and got on that. And then we were doing a pool project, a massive sports and infrastructure build. And the minister came down and opened it didn't say a word and then went back into the chamber and laid a piece of legislation down for voluntary student unionism. And we had massive capital loans to pay off that huge piece of student infrastructure. So that was a pivotal point where I knew governments and governance and legislative frameworks impacted what communities can do. So there were two pivotal points. And then I actually went on to sit on the University Council. So that was probably my first non executive directorship at in my mid 20s. And I thought, yeah, this is something I want to do. Later in my life, this is something I could do further along in my career.

Helga Svendsen 3:15

Right. So University Council as your first board or council or not executive role.

Leesa Chesser 3:20

Well, adult one, I guess you key to account. The Guild was elected representative. And it was a business. And I sat on the campus club and was president of that. And again, it was a business. Yes. But membership based businesses where the university was it very different.

Helga Svendsen 3:37

Yes.

Leesa Chesser 3:38

It had legislative and statutes and responsibility and other things that I had to think about from a student perspective, even though I was there in 1990, a long time ago,

Helga Svendsen 3:49

As the student voice almost so you were there as a student representative council elected? Yeah. How did you? How did they listen to the student voice? How was your engagement in that decision making process? How was it, you know, valued and listened and heard?

Leesa Chesser 4:04

Although we're very inclusive, by far, I mean, I was in my mid 20s, then, and it was the youngest person at the table and the papers and governance prep, always, I found quite impressive. And I

liked that, being able to do the due diligence in there. And we had some newer people coming onto the council, including some women that were quite inclusive and would make the time to talk. And we're prepared to treat people as peers. Yeah. And and serious and not in a tokenistic way. And that's why I liked being in that space.

Helga Svendsen 4:38

Yeah, that's fantastic. I've know I've said this before on this podcast, but my first board was the YWCA and we had a constitutional requirement for for directors to be aged 30 or under. And for that board, as you would hope for an organization that really supports young women, those for young women were not the young women and let's see what young women think and ask them they were equal men. The board and they made decisions along with the rest of us.

Leesa Chesser 5:02

And I've actually been on the YWCA board in Adelaide as a treasurer before I went into parliament. And we had that same constitutional requirement. In fact, I still have a strong relationship with a woman in that space and we catch up. And it's been great to see her career go ahead. And we still share similar experiences. But that was the year of the GFC. So that really sucked being the treasurer for that year because I inherited a whole deficit, and then had to explain it in an AGM but that's don't get to that part of directorship world, you don't get to choose the circumstances you serve in, you just have to be transparent and accountable. Exactly.

Helga Svendsen 5:44

So part of what we were going to talk about today is the AICD, the Australian Institute of company directors chairs mentoring program, which you have, I think it's just recently finished. You've recently participated in that.

Leesa Chesser 5:56

Yes, so I was in the 2019/2020 cohort, right. And it was a little bit extended because of COVID circumstances cause we had to go remote and do hybrid things, but it's officially part of the alumni now. Right. So alumus or alumna?

Helga Svendsen 6:10

I'm not sure you're I think your are a alumna, but collectively, alumnus I'm not sure somebody I'm sure some of the take on board people, let us know how that works. So tell us about the program. What does it involve? What value Did you derive from the program? How does it work?

Leesa Chesser 6:25

I've come out of state government was a cabinet minister. And as part of the transition to a portfolio career, I had it down as something I'd like to do. And I applied and you go through an application process, you get interviewed by [inaudible] they're supporting with that sort of vetting and shortlisting and it comes down to about you do an interview, and then 45 of you around the country have put in the cohort. So there's two from South Australia, most of the cohort are women 20 or 30 years plus in their careers. So they're ready to make the jump to a professional directorship portfolio. And they gather us together and do a couple of intensive days to start with. you're connected with a mentor who will carry you through the program. And you'll have a monthly catch up how you, like all mentoring relationships is a framework, but it's as much as each party is prepared to commit to, I found my mentor, a fantastic woman in South Australia. She's a fellow. And her journey has been really interesting. And she's been a great sounding board for boards and market and her experiences. So I found it a really beneficial support for me. But I've also found the online community that I've met. So I've got some directors in Adelaide and Perth that we've got a little whatsapp group, and we share. Maybe it's a lead, maybe it's Hey, have you thought about this or because board surveys is a whole lot of secret sauce in that space is never a perfect thing. So there's a lot of things that were demystify. Yeah. And how do you define your value in the board space, that the course we're all struggling with it and there's that aha moment, we're all sitting at the table going, ah, it's not just me is 45 other women going through that at the same time. So that's quite validating, because it can be quite a lonely journey moving from C suite into a portfolio career and you really have to be at the right stage to get into the program, you really have to be in that consulting, self employed, moving into the board space. Yeah. And your headsets got to be out of the C suite. And sitting at that operational strategic lens level. And that's what I think they're looking for when people apply.

Helga Svendsen 8:56

Tell us about your aha moment in defining your value for the boardroom. From the program.

Leesa Chesser 9:00

I sort of knew that I would be a different modern contemporary director. And I knew I wasn't the juvenile lawyer or accountant. I hadn't come out of commercial things. I was struggling for myself, because people would often say, oh, you're not commercial. Yeah. And it is a little bit ASX 200 focus. But when I got into the cohort, I realized it was quite diverse. And about third of them whilst they wouldn't mind doing that many of us are interested in government owned corpse or Mutual's or cooperatives. So for me trying to figure that value out, I see things from public veil, I see see things as public license to operate having come out of state government and leaved a public license to operate failure, and the rehabilitation of government reputation and space and restoration of faith. So they were useful things but that was the aha moment for me. I have, what's my age or board? What are the skill sets and eventually, not long after I got into the cohort, I landed my first paid

board in Sydney. And the things that they saw value for in recruiting me to that board, which has community options Australia were many of the things that the chairs mentoring program and helped me to find. So

Helga Svendsen 10:24

Can you tell us about how that board opportunity came about? Can you talk us through that?

Leesa Chesser 10:28

Literally, I saw an ad on AICD pages, you know, often the stuff I go for is I go in cold

Helga Svendsen 10:34

For this one, you saw it, what attracted you to the role?

Leesa Chesser 10:37

Community options Australia is a home support based services. So around Australia, they've got about 34/35 network partners that actually do the day to day service provision of people who have complex mental health and social support needs, like average daily living, there's some Commonwealth contracts and some New South Wales government contracts are just added a South Australian contracts. So we've just doing some stuff with in the Adelaide Hills here, that we're looking to broaden their market. Their understanding, I had clinical governance, even though I'm not a clinician, Mm hmm. And lived experience in that public license to operate, failure. Yeah. And that was the value that they saw. And, and we talked, and we clicked, and, yeah, I made it through the recruitment process. So that's nice when you land your first-ish. Mm hmm. without someone warming it up. But that's not how all directorships come about. Often, it's word of mouth. But for my first one, I was really pleased to do it that way. And I've got to say the AICD listings with that was advertised and I just rang up.

Helga Svendsen 11:44

So that's an organization that's, I think I heard you say, based in Sydney, but its footprint is National. Yeah, you're based in Adelaide. And in fact, you just did the chairs mentoring program, which is a national program. We're recording this, I don't always date them. But at the moment, it's worth doing. We're recording this at the start of January 2021. So a lot of that was during 2020. The year that was and COVID. What was the impact on your board portfolio and your governance, thinking of COVID?

Leesa Chesser 12:12

February last year, I landed at a strategic planning retreat in Bowral and Sydney and then I went home a few days later, I was at AICD day summit and the big gathering, everyone gets their top up for survey points. And on the way over, I was on a plane, and it was filled with all the people who are very excited to be going on a boat cruise, that ended up to be some of the Ruby princess crew. And people were coughing around me and I was already nervous. And then it was all over the summit, Black Swan events. And then we all went online. Until late November of this year, when I had to go up to Sydney for a AICD recruitment piece and see my family who hadn't seen for ever last year. Everything has been Zoom or Teams, although I prefer Zoom to Teams, likewise, and phone conversations. And so all my advisory boards that I've done and have kicked off in the last year, it seemed like it was crisis mode to about August, and then everyone went, Okay, with cope with a crisis, we've got to move forward, not just deal with a crisis. And the phone started to ring and then August, everyone started to move forward. That adapted. Yeah, I'm going to Brisbane next week. And that'll be the first time I've made some of the founders of the social enterprise that we're setting up in mental health and well being in that space for trauma and grief. So that will be really exciting. Yeah, to actually see them. And because I've had spent a number of hours days online with these people, but we still haven't been face to face,

Helga Svendsen 13:53

Or things I probably shouldn't say on the podcast, but I will. But one thing I found is that when you do everything online, I'm not very tall. And when when you do with everything in the virtual environment, no one knows how tall you are, and that all of a sudden you meet them in real life. And then I got shorter than I expected. So yeah, anyway, I'm five foot four, taller than me. Was that the first time you'd applied for that program? Because as I understand it, it's quite challenging to get into that program. So congratulations on being part of it. Was that the first time you'd applied? What do you recommend to people who are thinking about doing the program?

Leesa Chesser 14:26

In my research of going to the event and talking to previous I actually found some other people who'd been in and I went and had coffee with them and did my research. And they all worded me out that be prepared that it could be a couple of goes. And they all talked about the application process. And I was very blessed for them to share that knowledge with me. And then I did the application process and I was prepping for it. And it's an online form, which takes quite a while and it does require you to distill a lot about your career and things about it in this different lens. And I wrote it up. And I remember sitting up till the middle of early hours and I sent send and thinking, prepared to go a second time. And then when I got the interview, I remember dancing around my kitchen table being so my children thought someone had died. Because I was so excited. Yeah, I was really pleased I got in the first time for me that was like, Yes, tick. Even if I don't make the next step. It was good practice. So every time I try and do something, even if I don't get a yes, I try and take a

positive for it. Yeah, great. So but the application process, you do really have to think about and reflect on your career, allow yourself enough time to do that form, and save it. Screenshot it, so you know where you're up to, and be prepared for that process. And then you'll have an interview with headhunters so. And if you've never dealt with a headhunter, which I had never met, or had an interview with them, I found that quite intimidating. All right. So

Helga Svendsen 16:04

Tell us how your interview went and what was expected and what was unexpected. And your advice to others that might come up for that positions

Leesa Chesser 16:11

That I thought that they'd be interested in me for me, not the things they saw from my LinkedIn profile, or the things I'd spoken about deeply in my application. Right. So they that they proposition again, so they were interested in infrastructure, and the scope of the decision making where I could demonstrate numbers. With a health portfolio when you've got two ministries, it's even your budget papers aren't necessarily draw down in estimates to exact numbers. But like sharing Public Works twice and doing the Adelaide Oval redevelopment for public value, or water and energy, like they're the \$450 million spends. Yeah, they're interested in that pocket. I guess that's the commerciality and the ASICs decision making. But when you're sitting at a cabinet table, like NDS was the state span where we're heading to the Commonwealth was 723 mil. Yeah, so I'm comfortable in that space. So that's the lens that they were looking at my history from where I was looking at it from a different perspective.

Helga Svendsen 17:16

Interesting. And so presumably, it's in the interview room where you're thinking, right, we're going to ask me about this. And all of a sudden, they're saying, Tell us about his telephone, our telephone. Yep. So from that, what might be your advice to others that might be coming up to that sort of interview, whether it's for the chairs, mentoring program, or with headhunters generally? What would be your advice to women in thinking about preparing for that sort of interview?

Leesa Chesser 17:40

I think if you're coming from public service or public administration perspective, and out of government, putting in numbers in your metrics in there are hugely important

Helga Svendsen 17:49

Yeah, right.

Leesa Chesser 17:50

Yeah, making sure because we tend to think in social outcomes. So reflecting value, which we'll probably talk about later with the podcasts that I'll recommend to people. But yes, how you define value?

Helga Svendsen 18:03

Yes. Great. All right, folks. So I think what I'm hearing there is, the chairs mentoring program provides some aha moments and is of value, be prepared to apply more than once, you might get lucky. But be prepared to apply more than once and put quite a bit of work into your application. And think about the numbers in terms of your interview. And the broadly around the value that they might be looking for, rather than than what you might be thinking you're there for? Yeah. Okay. Now, advisory boards. Yeah. You're also involved in a number of advisory boards, and have built that as part of your portfolio as well. What was your first advisory board? And how has that helped you to build your board portfolio?

Leesa Chesser 18:45

I figured as part of my monopoly board that I'm building a portfolio career advisory board sit nicely and compliment non executive directorship. And I joined a group of other advisors in Brisbane, and I've done a course about, I'd gone along. And then, very shortly when I met the community, they said, Oh, no, you need to do the chairs course, because I have chaired a lot of things in my professional life. And I realized very quickly, the social enterprise space is something I bring value to understanding what governments want and grant funding and social base solutions. So I've built that space of my advisory portfolio and treat that as part of my non executive. As long as you understand very clearly the definition and the space and legal risks of being a shadow director versus a non executive director. Yeah, that's why I like to chair them not just be an advisor, because that, you know, you'll be talking to people who are growing a small business and you're there to help them think from the strategic space like you are from an need role. But sometimes you might do a few practical But you have to be very clear in the way that decisions are made by the directors of the business at the end of the day, because they are the legal responsibility. So you give them a framework built around ideas, support them in growing their growth, appetite scale, startup, whatever level of business or SME they're at. But it's different from being operational and in the rushes with them day to day. You're more like a coach mentor.

Helga Svendsen 20:27

Yeah, yep.

Leesa Chesser 20:29

So as I've done the advisory board, I've picked up more mentoring. So female founders, I seem to have a pocket of women are coming to me now who are growing the SMEs, like there's a psychology practice, a female in the building industry, who is a very male dominated, why don't I help her with a bit of things, but sometimes it's a conversation. Yeah, that helps them build up their confidence, particular space that they want to grow their business. And then I've got one that's in the NDIS is space that connects back to the human services. But there's a female founders pocket now I've got a machine learning mental health and well being app a lot, 14 that's really cool and funky, and it's got like a Fitbit for well being, but it puts your emotional sentiment into six or seven different bubbles. And it'll be a lovely add on to if you're an HR platform, and organizational change, but also you can, it's a bit it's like calm without all the extra reading and music and stuff. But this all actually to Fitbit concept. So that you can, you can do more creative things at advisory boards, perhaps and you do in the innovation space than you can in a formal NED role.

Helga Svendsen 21:46

Hmm, fantastic. Couple of things there. (a) if you send me the websites for some of the organizations that you're on advisory boards, for, we'll make sure we put that in the show notes as well, so people can get to have a look at them. But secondly, I did an interview with Louise Broekman from the advisory board center a few months ago and her reflections unsurprisingly similar about being able to provide that support to startups and SMEs without having to do the compliance side of things. That sounds really fun.

Leesa Chesser 22:12

Yeah, so Jan, I love talking to Jan and Louise, and Jan plays in the female entrepreneurship space in Queensland as well.

Helga Svendsen 22:20

Yes, Jen's also been on the podcast about research she did about female founders, which I was thinking about.

Leesa Chesser 22:25

So that fits really nicely with the Hen House cooperative, where he's I sit on the board of, and we're a community member at Stone and Chalk, which is our innovation precinct. And it's been I think it is still the largest one apart from New South Wales, one precinct in southern hemisphere. So that's where the Space Agency's located. It's where the MIT Machine Learning Labs in University of

Adelaide got the machine learning labs. And I love being a mentor at Stone and Chalk. And the people I meet, they're possible people, they're interested in solving big problems, yes. And scaling, purposeful profit, a lot of them are driven by the idea of 1%, and SDGs, and the UN, and the Hen House sits here as a community member, but the Hen House Co Op, is really our goal is to end the gender investor gap for female founders. So that ties nicely to what, Jan and the Queensland entrepreneurship community. So a friend of mine, Maura, we're who you may have spoken to, yes, it might be on a podcast, she sits on the entrepreneurial advisory board. So there's a little co-op of women are doing a little gang of women doing some some changes. And we've had some incubators, and we're learning and reflect on that. But it's ending or bending the curve. Yes. So that women get more money early stage in their ventures. So that we impact and just get rid of some of that discrimination and inequality. Yes. And women can scale successfully.

Helga Svendsen 24:01

Oh, I knew this would happen. Leesa, how half hour has flown by. So I'm wondering what are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation we've had today.

Leesa Chesser 24:11

Advisory boards are something that are complementary, not competitive, yep. to being an non executive director. And actually, they round out your board portfolio. It's also really incredibly creative space. I love the startups. So for me, that's a really good space to be in. Traditionally, people think about mentoring, that's nice and complimentary. But advisory boards are a great space. Just be very clear about how you document how you run it, and it be maintain your independence in that space. Yeah. And I think Louise and Jan probably talked about that in previous podcasts, but I really enjoy being on advisory boards. And I love seeing people thrive. And it's great to see businesses either start up, get to revenue or scale successfully, or an SME grind when you set Hmm, that is a great way of broadening your skills out as well and your learnings.

Helga Svendsen 25:06

And is there a resource you would like to share with a take on board community?

Leesa Chesser 25:09

Yeah, um, podcasts are something of I've been listening to a lot last year. But the brief lectures on BBC, I've been listening to them over the summer. So Dr. Mark Cagney, who's a former Bank of England, Governor has been talking about public value and how we define value. And I know we were talking about that before. So how to redefine value? And how do we balance moral and market sentiment? So it's sort of new economic theory, but it makes sense with climate change, and public value from government from my perspective, but I guess it's all about purpose for profit, and profits

good as long as it's done in a human focus, societal problem solving. So it goes back to that un SDGs. So I think there's four lectures in that, that have great podcasts on the BBC and big ideas have broadcast them. If you go to the big ideas ibci view thing, but I reckon that's a great one. If you're interested in social impact, or ESG.

Helga Svendsen 26:14

Fantastic. Well, again, I'll make sure I put a link to that in the show notes so people can easily access it. Great. Thank you so much for being with us today on the Take On Board Podcast and for sharing some of your wisdom with the take on board community. I know people will appreciate it greatly. So thank you.

Leesa Chesser 26:28

No, thank you for having me today. And hope you enjoy your time in Adelaide and looking forward to listening to more of your podcasts now.

Helga Svendsen 26:35

Excellent. Thank you.